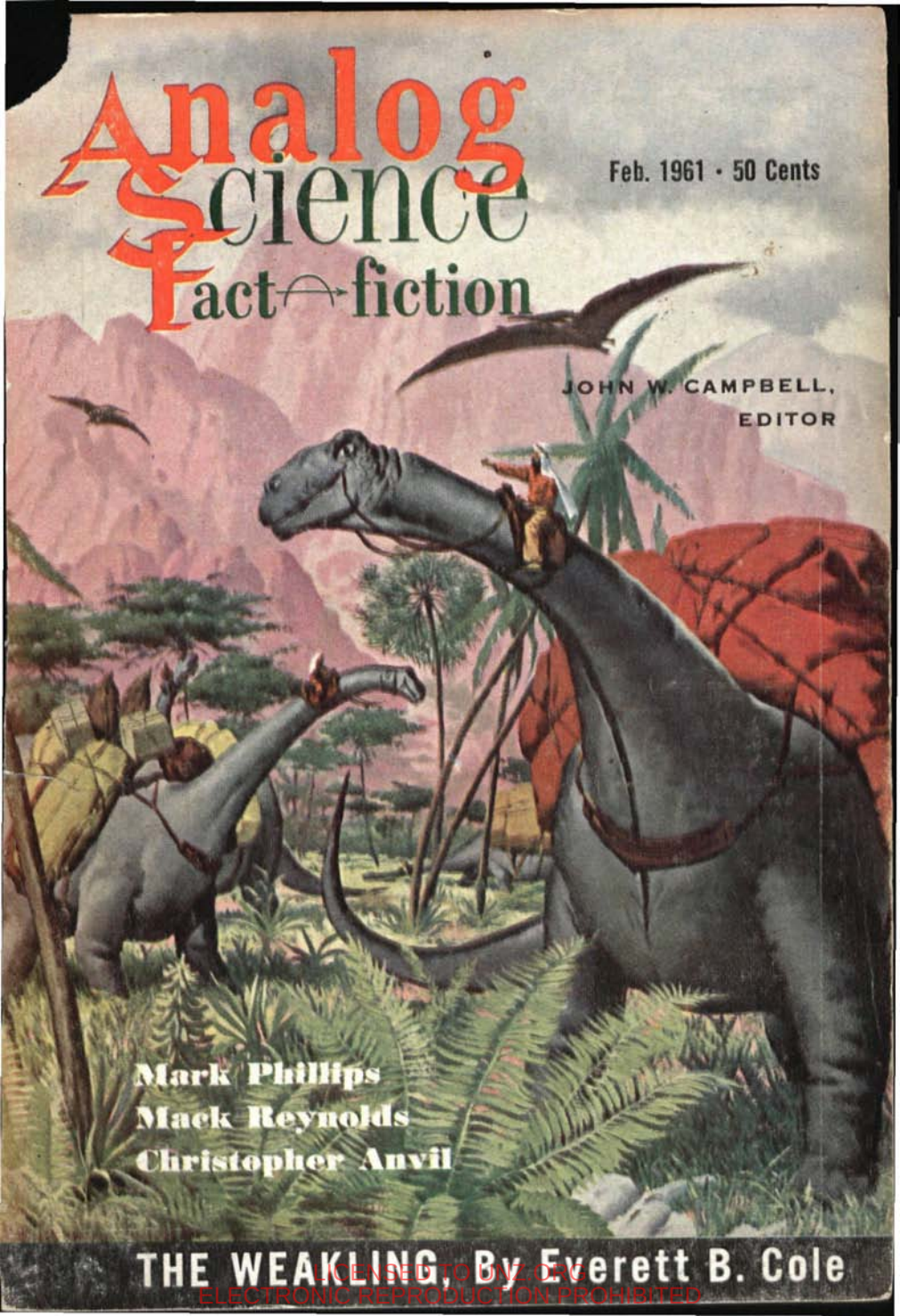


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EDITOR



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THE WEAKLING, By Everett B. Cole

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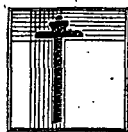
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ON THE SELECTIVE BREEDING OF HUMAN BEINGS



THE current estimates of astrophysicists indicate that our local galaxy is something like 300,000 light-years in circumference. The solar-system is moving through space—in a great orbit about the galactic center—at about a dozen miles a second. Now obviously that sort of snail-pace crawl is never going to get us anywhere in transgalactic, or circumgalactic travel.

Well . . . it won't in one man's lifetime—or even in the lifetime of Herr Hitler's boasted 1,000-year Reich. (Even if it had come off!)

However, astrophysicists also estimate that the Solar System is now on about it's twenty-fifth swing around the galactic center. After all, five billion years isn't anything too overwhelming to a normal, main-sequence star, nicely stabilized in the G-range of spectrum types. Just because 200,000,000 years seems rather long to us—well, there are different time-scales to apply to different phe-

nomena. Present theories suggest our Sun should be good for another two hundred fifty swings around the galaxy before reaching old age.

What is, and is-not possible or practicable many times depends on the time-scale imposed; a dozen miles a second is an "impossible" speed for circumnavigating the entire galaxy, is it?

I've had a good many arguments on the subject of selective breeding of human beings—not on the subject of whether or not it should be done, or is ethical, but on whether or not it can be done at all. The essential argument against the possibility is in essence: "You can't eliminate recessive characteristics! They'll hide in the germ-plasm where you can't tell they're there, and crop out again one

thousand—two thousand—five thousand years later. You'll never be able to get rid of a characteristic you've decided against! No human plan has ever lasted even one thousand years, let alone five thousand!"

In other words, the argument is that the rate of advance is impossibly slow with respect to the distance to be covered.

And that simply suggests that the wrong time scale is being considered.

I'd like to suggest to the attention of geneticists and animal breeders in general, some consideration of the problem of selective breeding of human beings—with a time scale of the order appropriate to evolutionary phenomena. Say let's consider what can be done in 50 kiloyears or so, by the application of extremely harsh culling of the rejected types.

Properly, we should talk in terms of kilogenerations rather than kiloyears; after all, it's the number of generations that counts—not the time-span involved. Modern human racial types tend toward a twenty-five-year generation, but the most primitive human types still surviving tend toward a ten- to fifteen-year generation; the females start producing young at eleven to twelve years of age, and average something approaching one per year for another twelve years or so. (Most of the young die, of course, in infancy—but the rate of production is high.) In the earliest protohuman groups, we can assume a generation was shorter, and some ten generations could be packed into a century.

Anthropologists seem to feel that human tribes have existed for a minimum of 250,000 years; we can say that's a minimum of ten thousand generations, and probably somewhat nearer eight thousand generations.

Now recessive characteristics that don't manifest themselves in a span of one thousand generations must be really quite recessive—recessive enough that we can be quite unperturbed by their phenomenally rare appearance. Albinos exist, and varicolored skin appears occasionally—a sort of "pinto" human being—but we don't have to disturb ourselves greatly about those unimportant rarities.

Then any selective breeding system that could maintain a program of selection for a period of one thousand generations, not one thousand years, would have some real effect. Moreover, if the selective mechanism were utterly ruthless, savagely harsh, and culled so hard and tight as to destroy sixty per cent of the young produced each generation—a level of ruthless selectivity no modern human group would countenance for a moment!—considerable effect could be produced in selective breeding of human beings.

I propose to show that precisely such a selective breeding system did in fact—and still does—operate. I want, first, to make it absolutely clear that I am NOT making any moral-ethical judgments whatever. It is a fact that wolves produce a selective breeding effect on deer herds; this is readily observed, without any need

for moral judgment as to whether they should or should not do so.

In the same purely observational sense, I want to show that human beings have been selectively bred by a mechanism that does have the requisite long time-span effect to make one thousand years like a day in its sight—one thousand years or one thousand generations.

There are two things that set Man apart from the animals. (Observable things, that it! The question of *soul* we'll have to skip because we can't observe it.) One: Man has the ability to use symbolic abstractions. (A certain few animals have this ability to some slight degree.) Two: Man has the ability to override his instinctive behavior patterns by intellectual-training ideas. No other animal has that ability.

Please note: that ability is not absolute in Man, nor is it even yet invariably present in all men. There are indications that baboons have some degree of symbolization language, and strong indications that porpoises also have a language. Let's consider the problem of the very early proto-human proto-tribe; in essence, it was to distinguish the Men from the Monkeys, among the progeny produced.

One thing that helps on-making the thing possible is that the human race has a nearly-unique situation; the human male can rape the female without her consent or co-operation—something impossible to practically all other mammalian species. This

is somewhat more important than it at first appears. If the males of the proto-tribe are going to select the young produced, and destroy the ones they consider unacceptable—the female's instincts are to protect her young, and to find and mate with males who will accept and protect her young. The proto-human females would have refused to mate with males who destroyed their young, if they were able to refuse! There's no use having a good, valid idea . . . if you can't make it work, you know. If the females had been able to block it, it wouldn't have worked.

So Item #1 in the proto-human males: They could overcome the ancient mammalian instinct to accept and protect *all* their female's progeny.

Obviously the No. 1 test for Man vs. Monkey was whether the individual young learned to use language. All indications available suggest that those who didn't pass the test were converted to food for the tribe; cannibalism was, at the period under discussion, *de rigueur*.

That individuals incapable of learning to use language were flunked from the proto-tribe is fairly understandable; a group having a really rugged struggle to achieve a subsistence level of existence doesn't support incompetents. It can't. It has a better use for them—as food.

Please try to get something of the viewpoint of these protohumans. They were not human . . . yet. They were not sentimental; they were, equally, not cruel. A falling tree may crush a child, and hold it pinned.

helpless, while it dies slowly in screaming agony; still, the tree is not cruel. A wolf kills a fawn; it is not cruel, either—simply hungry. The early proto-humans were incapable of cruelty; that is an attitude, a concept, beyond the reach of their very un-subtle minds. Cruelty requires sophistication; these proto-humans utterly lacked it.

If they caught four members of an alien tribe, only one of whom could be eaten by the tribe that day, they broke the arms and legs of the other three. This kept the extra supply of meat fresh and unspoiled until it, too, could be eaten while very simply and directly preventing escape. This was not cruelty; it was lack of refrigeration.

The young who did not learn to use speech were recognized as nonmen, as animals, and eaten.

Maintain that system for some one to ten kilogenerations . . . and it's a very, very effective selective breeding system. Even recessive nonspeech genes will get combed out.

Oh, of course they are a few who couldn't learn to speak because of hearing defects, or vocal anomalies, who were, otherwise, perfectly sound carriers of sound genes. But that was quite unimportant; the females were always producing more young than could be fed anyway. And the hearing defect might have been a genetic anomaly too . . . so into the pot with him.

Note that once a proto-human proto-tribe capable of speech arises, it will inevitably become a self-perpet-

uating selective-breeding system that culls out all nonspeaking young produced. And this tendency won't continue just for a few generations—just while a particular dynasty of tribal leaders prevails. It has a characteristic that will make it continue as a basic of the tribe *so long as the tribe exists*.

Since tribes capable of speech have a very, very real advantage over nonspeaking herds, the tribe will persist indefinitely.

If it is overcome and destroyed—it's almost certain that only another speaking tribe will be able to organize sufficiently to defeat it.

And, incidentally, note that War was invented by proto-humans as a necessary, racial-benefiting system. Any speaking tribe has so great an advantage over any nonspeaking herd that with only animal enemies, wild and destructive variants could rise to lethal concentration before being eliminated. A speaking tribe could go off on some intrinsically destructive aberrant development and go beyond the point of no return if only animal predators menaced it. But with alien speaking tribes around to menace—they will be forced to fly right, or get clipped quick.

Only other men, that is, constituted adequate judges of human or proto-human tribes.

Given a few thousand generations—and tribal life has been going on for at least ten thousand generations—the selective breeding system produced a pure-bred strain of speech-gifted people. Today, even our lowest

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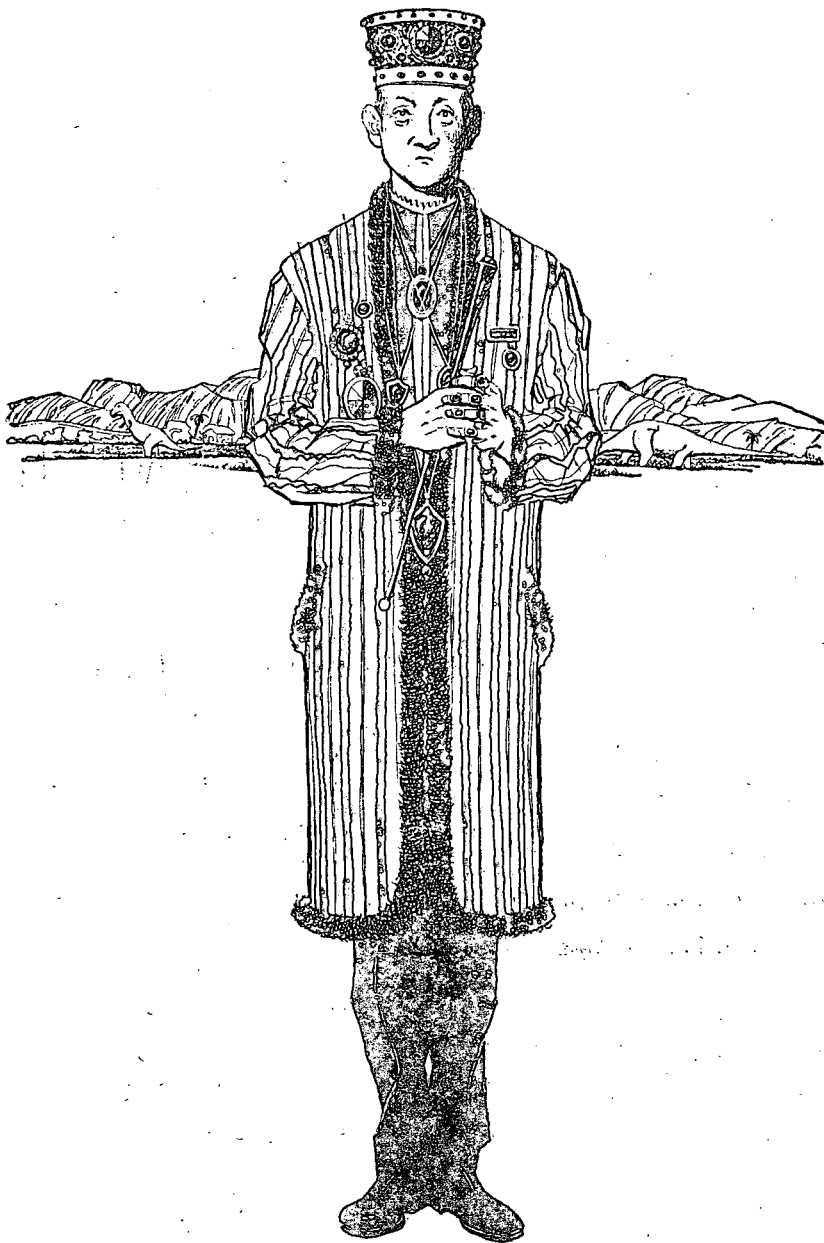
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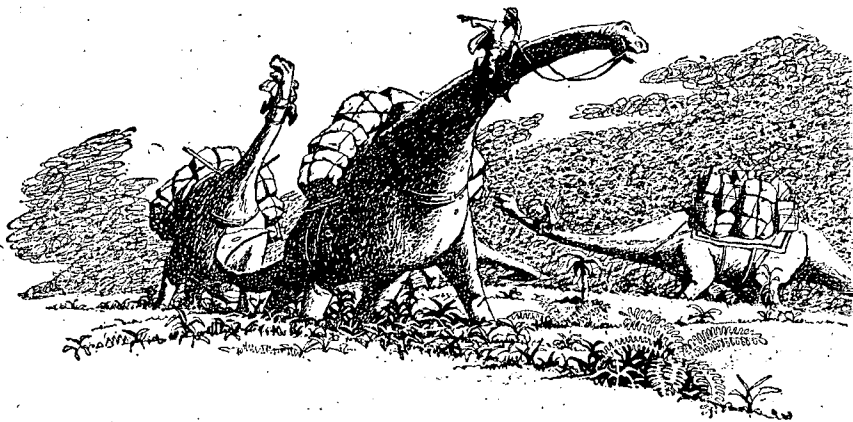
By

EVERETT B. COLE

A strong man can, of course, be dangerous, but he doesn't approach the vicious deadliness of a weakling—with a weapon!

Illustrated by van Dongen





ARAN MAKUN looked across the table at the caravan master.

"And you couldn't find a trace of him?"

"Nothing. Not even a scrap of his cargo or so much as the bones of a long-neck. He just dropped out of sight of his whole train. He went through this big estate, you see. Then he cut back to pick up some of his stops on the northern swing. Well, that was all. He didn't get to the first one." The other waved a hand.

"Weird situation, too. Oh, the null was swirling, we know that, and he could have been caught in an arm. It happens, but it isn't too often that an experienced man like your brother gets in so deep he can't get out somehow—or at least leave some trace of what happened." The man picked up his cup, eyeing it thoughtfully.

"Oh, we've all had close ones, sure. We've all lost a long-neck or so, now

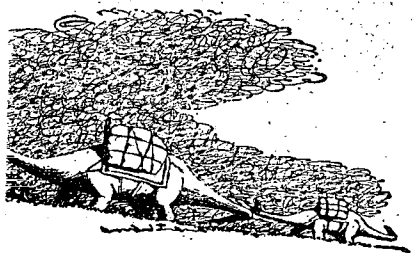
and then. Whenever the null swirls, it can cover big territory in a big hurry and most of that northern swing is null area at one time or another. One of those arms can overrun a train at night and if a man loses his head, he's in big trouble." He sipped from his cup.

"Young caravan master got caught that way, just a while back. A friend of mine, Dr. Zalbon, was running the swing after the null retracted. He found what was left."

"Told me he ran into a herd of carnivores. Fifteen or twenty real big fellows. Jaws as long as a man. He killed them off and then found they'd been feeding on what was left of Dar Konil's train."

He shook his head. "It's not a nice area."

"Hold everything." Naran leaned forward. "You said my brother went through this big estate. Anyone see him come out?"



Dar Girdek smiled. "Oh, sure. The Master of the Estates, Kio Barra, himself. He saw him to the border and watched him go on his way."

Naran looked doubtful. "And what kind of a character is this Barra?"

"Oh, him!" Dar Girdek waved a hand. "Nothing there. In the first place, he holds one of the biggest estates in the mountain area. So what would he want to rob a freight caravan for?" He laughed.

"In the second place, the guy's practically harmless. Oh, sure, he's got a title. He's Lord of the Mountain Lake. And he wears a lot of psionic crystalwear. But he's got about enough punch to knock over some varmint—if it's not too tough. Dar Makun might be your weak brother, but he'd have eaten that guy for breakfast if he'd tried to be rough."

"Psionic weakling, you mean? But how does he manage to be a Master Protector of an Estate?"

Dar Girdek smiled wryly. "Father died. Brother sneaked off somewhere. That left him. Title's too clear for anyone to try any funny business."

"I see." Naran leaned back. "Now, what about this null?"

"Well, of course you know about the time the pseudomen from the Fifth managed to sneak in and lay a mess of their destructors on Carnol?"

"I might. I was one of the guys that saw to it they didn't get back to celebrate." Naran closed his eyes for an instant.

"Yeah. Way I heard it, you were the guy that wrapped 'em up. Too bad they didn't get you on the job sooner. Maybe we wouldn't have this mess on our hands now." Dar Girdek shrugged.

"Anyway, they vaporized the city and a lot of area around it. That was bad, but the aftereffect is worse. We've got scholars beating their brain cells together, but all they can tell us is that there's a big area up there just as psionically dead as an experimental chamber." He grinned.

"I could tell 'em that much myself. It's a sort of cloud. Goes turbulent, shoots out arms, then folds in again.

"We'd by-pass the whole thing, but it's right on the main trade route. Only way around it is plenty of days out of the path, clear down around the middle sea and into the lake region. Then you have to go all the way back anyway, if you plan to do any mid-continent trading. And you still take a chance of getting caught in a swirl arm."

Naran tilted his head. "So? Suppose you do get into a swirl? All you need to do is wait." He smiled.

"You know. Just sort of ignore it. It'll go away."

"Uh huh. Sounds easy enough. It's about what we do when we have to. But there are things living there. They can be hard to ignore."

"You mean the carnivores?"

"That's right. If you meet one of those fellows out in normal territory, he's no trouble at all. You hit him with a distorter and he flops. Then you figure out whether to reduce him to slime or leave the carcass for his friends and relations." He smiled.

"From what your brother said, you wouldn't need the distorter."

Naran smiled deprecatingly. "That's one of the things they pay me for," he remarked. "We run into some pretty nasty beasties at sea."

"Yeah. I've heard. Big, tough fellows. Our varmints are smaller. But what would you do if you ran into twenty tons or so of pure murder, and you with no more psionic power than some pseudoman?"

Naran looked at him thoughtfully. "I hadn't thought of that," he admitted. "I might not like it. Jaws as long as a man, you said?"

The other nodded. "Longer, sometimes. And teeth as long as your hand. One snap and there's nothing left."

"When they kill a long-neck, they have a good meal and walk away from whatever's left. But people are something else. They just can't get enough and they don't leave any crumbs." He waved a hand.

"There've been several times caught by those things. A swirl arm comes over at night, you see, and the caravan master loses his head. He can't think of anything but getting out. Oh, he can yell at his drivers. They've got a language, and we all know it. That's easy. But did you ever try to get a long-neck going without psionic control?"

"I see what you mean. It could be a little rough."

"Yeah. It could be. Anyway, about this time, everybody's yelling at everybody else. The long-necks are squealing and bellowing. Drivers are jerking on reins. And a herd of carnivores hears the commotion. So, they drop around to see the fun. See what I mean?"

Naran nodded and Dar Girdek went on.

"Well, that's about it. Once in a great while, some guy manages to get into a cave and hide out till the null swings away and another caravan comes along. But usually, no one sees anything but a little of the cargo and some remains of long-necks. No one's ever come up with any part of man or pseudoman. As I said, one snap and there's nothing left."

Naran smiled wryly. "Tough to be popular, I guess." He leaned forward.

"But you've been over the trail several times since he disappeared. And you said you've seen nothing. No trace of the train. That right?"

The other shook his head. "Not even a cargo sling."

"You're making up a train now, aren't you? I'd like to go along on this

at trip. Fact is, I've been thinking some nasty thoughts. And I'm going to be uneasy till I find out whether I'm right or not."

Dar Girdek rubbed his chin. "Want to buy in, maybe?"

"No, I don't think so. I'll work my way—as your lead driver."

"Oh, no!" Dar Girdek laughed. "You don't put a psionic on some long-neck. Lead driver's pseudoman, just like the rest." He sobered.

"Oh, sure. You could handle the drivers, but it just isn't done."

Naran smiled. "Oh, as far as the other drivers'll know, I'm just another pseudoman. I've been a ship's non-psi agent, remember? We earn our keep by dealing with the people in non-psi areas."

"It won't work." The caravan master shook his head. "These drivers can get pretty rough with each other. You'd have to set two or three of them back on their heels the first day. It would be either that, or get a lot of bruises and end up as camp flunky."

"Could be," Naran told him. "Tell you what. You turn me loose in an experimental chamber so I can't fudge. Then send your toughest driver in and tell him to kick me out of there. I'll show him some tricks I learned from the non-psi's overseas and he'll be a smarter man when he wakes up."

Leuwan, Kio Barra, Lord of the Mountain Lake, Master of the Estates Kira Barra, and Protector of the Common Good, stood examining the assortment of crystals in a cabinet.

He hesitated over a large, brilliantly gleaming sphere of crystallized carbon, then shook his head. That one would be pretty heavy going, he was sure. The high intensity summary said something about problems of the modern world, so it could be expected to be another of those dull reports on the welfare of the Commonwealth.

Why, he wondered, did some projection maker waste good time and effort by making up things like that? And why did they waste more time and effort by sending them around? When a man wanted to relax, he wanted something to relax with. What he was looking for was something light.

He turned his attention to other crystals, at last selecting a small, blue prism. He held it up, regarding it, then nodded and placed it on the slender black pedestal near his chair, where he could observe without undue effort.

He turned, examining each corner of his empty study, then took his sapphire-tipped golden staff from under his arm, placing it carefully on a rack built into his chair arm, where it would be convenient to his hand should the need arise.

One could never be too careful, he thought. Of course, he could deal with any recalcitrant slave by other means, but the distorter was convenient and could be depended upon to give any degree of pressure desired. And it was a lot less trouble to use than to concentrate on more fatiguing efforts such as neural pressure or selective paralysis.

One must conserve one's powers for times when they might be really needed.

Too, there was the remote possibility that some lackland wanderer might come by and find a flaw in the protection of the Estates—even somehow penetrate to the Residence. Barra shuddered at that thought, then shrugged it off. Kira Barra was well protected, of that he had made sure. Ever vigilant surrogates were deposited in all the strategic spots of the Estates—not only to allow quick observations of the condition of the lands, but also to give automatic warning of the approach of anyone of inimical turn of mind.

He eased his bulk into the chair, twisted about for a few moments as it adjusted to fit his body, then leaned back with a sigh of relaxation and directed his thoughts to the crystal before him.

Under the impulses of his amplified thought, the crystal glowed, appeared to expand, then became a three-dimensional vista.

The high intensity summary and excerpt leader had been not too deceptive, Barra told himself as the story unfolded. It was a well done adventure projection, based on the war with the Fifth planet. Critically, he watched the actions of a scout crew, approving of the author's treatment and selection of material. He, Barra, was something of a connoisseur of these adventure crystals, even though he had never found it necessary to leave the protection of Earth's surface.

He shrugged, taking his attention from the projection.

The lacklanders, he told himself—entertainment people, caravan masters, seafarers, other wanderers of light responsibility—were the natural ones to be selected to go out and deal with remote emergencies.

Like all stable, responsible men of property and worth, he was far too valuable to the Commonwealth to risk himself in wild dashes to the dead, non-psionic lands, or out into the emptiness of space. As far as risking himself on combat missions of interplanetary war—He shook his head. This was pure stupidity.

He frowned uneasily. It had been a bit unfair, though, of the Controllers. They had completely excused him from service on the basis of inaptitude. It had rankled ever since.

Of course he couldn't be expected to dash madly about in some two-man scout. Even as his brother's assistant, he had been a person of quite definite standing and responsibility and such antics would have been beneath his dignity. He had made that quite plain to them.

There had been responsible posts where a man of his quality and standing could have been of positive value. And, as he had pointed out, they could have assigned him to one of those.

But no! They had merely excused him. Inapt!

As far as that went, he told himself angrily, he, Kira Barra, could comport himself with the best if necessity demanded.

Those dashing characters in this projection were, of course, the figments of some unstable dreamer's imagination. But they showed the instability of the usual lackland wanderers. And what could such men do that a solid, responsible man like himself couldn't do better?

He returned to the crystal, then shook his head in disgust. It had become full—flat—meaningless. Besides, he had matters of real import to take care.

He directed his attention to the chair, which obediently swung about until he faced his large view crystal.

"Might as well have a look at the East Shore," he told himself.

As he focused his attention, the crystal expanded; then became a huge window through which he could see the shores of the inland sea, then the lands to the east of the large island on which he had caused his Residence to be built. He looked approvingly at the rolling, tree-clad hills as the view progressed.

Suddenly, he frowned in annoyance. The great northern null was in turbulence again, thrusting its shapeless arms down toward the borders of Kira Barra. He growled softly.

There, he told himself, was the result of the carelessness of those lackland fools who has been entrusted with the defense of the home planet. Their loose, poorly planned defenses had allowed the pseudomen of the Fifth to dash in and drop their destructors in a good many spots on the surface. And here was one of them:

Here was a huge area which had once been the site of a great city and which had contained the prosperous and productive estates of a Master Protector, now reduced to a mere wasteland into which slaves might escape, to lead a brute-like existence in idleness.

He had lost pseudomen slaves in this very null and he knew he would probably lose more. Despite the vigilance of the surrogates, they kept slipping across the river and disappearing into that swirling nothingness. And now, with that prominence so close—

He had no guards he could trust to go after the fellows, either. Such herd guards as he had would decide to desert their protector and take up the idle life which their fellow pseudomen had adopted. A few of them had gone out and done just that. Their memories of the protection and privileges granted them were short and undependable. He sighed.

"Ungrateful beasts!"

Some Master Protectors had little trouble along that line. Others had managed to hire the services of halfmen—weak psionics, too weak to govern and yet strong and able enough to be more than mere pseudomen.

These halfmen made superb, loyal guards and overseers—for some—but none had remained at Kira Barra. They had come, to be sure, but they had stayed on for a time, then drifted away.

And, he thought angrily, it was illegal to restrain these halfmen in any

way. Some soft-headed fool had granted their kind the rights of Commonwealth citizenship. Halfmen had even managed to take service with the fleet during the war with the Fifth Planet. Some of them had even managed somehow to be of small value—and now many of them held the status of veterans of that victorious war—a status he, one of the great landholders, was denied.

No, he told himself, until such time as the nulls were solved and eliminated, such pseudomen as managed to cross the northeastern river were safe enough in their unknown land. And, he thought sourly, the scholars had made no progress in their studies of the nulls.

Probably they were concerning themselves with studies more likely to give them preferment or more immediate personal gain.

Of course, the wasteland wasn't entirely unknown, not to him, at least. He had viewed the area personally. There were hilltops on the Estates from which ordinary eyesight would penetrate far into the dead area, even though the more powerful and accurate parasight was stopped at its borders. Yes, he had seen the affected area.

He had noted that much of it had regained a measure of fertility. There was life now—some of it his own meat lizards who had wandered across the river and out of his control. And he had even seen some of the escaped pseudomen slinking through the scrub growth and making their crudely primitive camps.

"Savages!" he told himself. "Mere animals. And one can't do a thing about them, so long as they let that dead area persist."

Eventually, the scholars had reported, the dead areas would diminish and fade from existence. He smiled bitterly. Here was a nice evasion—a neat excuse for avoiding study and possible, dangerous research.

So long as those nulls remained, they would be sources of constant loss of the responsible Master Protectors, and would thus threaten the very foundations of the Commonwealth.

Possibly, he should— He shook his head.

No, he thought, this was impractical. Parasight was worthless beyond the borders of the null. No surrogate could penetrate it and no weapon would operate within it. It would be most unsafe for any true man to enter. There, one would be subject to gross, physical attack and unable to make proper defense against it.

Certainly, the northern null was no place for him to go. Only the pseudomen could possibly tolerate the conditions to be found there, and thus, there they had found haven and were temporarily supreme.

Besides, this matter was the responsibility of the Council of Controllers and the scholars they paid so highly.

He concentrated on the crystal, shifting the view to scan toward the nearest village.

Suddenly, he sat forward in his chair. A herd of saurians was slowly

drifting toward one of the arms the null had thrust out. Shortly, they would have ambled into a stream and beyond, out of all possible control. Perhaps they might wander for years in the wastelands. Perhaps they and their increase might furnish meat for the pseudomen who lurked inside the swirling blankness.

He snarled to himself. No herders were in sight. No guard was in attendance. He would have to attend to this matter himself. He concentrated his attention on the power crystals of a distant surrogate, willing his entire ego into the controls.

At last, the herd leader's head came up. Then the long-neck curved, snaking around until the huge beast stared directly at the heap of rocks which housed the crystals of the surrogate himself. The slow drift of the herd slowed even more; then stopped as the other brutes dimly recognized that something had changed. More of the ridiculously tiny heads swiveled toward the surrogate.

Kio Barra squirmed in his chair. Holding these empty minds was a chore he had always hated.

Certainly, there was less total effort than that required for the control of the more highly organized pseudomen, but the more complex minds reacted with some speed and the effort was soon over. There was a short, sometimes sharp struggle, then surrender.

But this was long-term, dragging toil—a steady pushing at a soggy, unresisting, yet heavy mass. And full concentration was imperative if any-

thing was to be accomplished. The reptilian minds were as unstable as they were empty and would slip away unless firmly held. He stared motionlessly at his crystal, willing the huge reptiles to turn—to waddle back to the safe grasslands of the estate, far from the null.

At last, the herd was again in motion. One by one, the huge brutes swung about and galloped clumsily toward more usual pastures, their long-necks swaying loosely with their motion.

Switching from surrogate to surrogate, Barra followed them, urged them, forced them along until they plunged into the wide swamp north-east of Tibara village.

He sighed wearily and shifted his viewpoint to a surrogate which overlooked the village itself. What, he wondered, had happened to the herdsmen—and to the guards who should be overseeing the day's work?

Half-hidden among ferns and the mastlike stems of trees, the rude huts of Tibara nestled in the forest, blending with their surroundings, until only the knowing observer could identify them by vague form. Barra shifted his viewpoint to the central village surrogate.

There were other open spaces in the village, but this was the largest. Here was the village well, near which a few children played some incomprehensible game. An old man had collected a pile of rock and had started work on the well curb. Now, he sat near his work, leaning against the

partly torn down wall. Spots of sunlight, coming through the fronds high above, struck his body, leaving his face in shadow. He dozed in the warmth, occasionally allowing his eyes to half open as he idly regarded the scene before him.

Before some of the huts surrounding the rude plaza, women squatted on the ground, their arms swinging monotonously up and down as they struck their wooden pestles into bowls of grain which they were grinding to make the coarse meal which was their mainstay of diet.

A few men could be seen, scratching at small garden plots or idly repairing tools. Others squatted near their huts, their attention occupied by fishing gear. Still others merely leaned against convenient trees, looking at each other, their mouths moving in the grotesque way of the pseudoman when he could find an excuse to idle away time.

Barra listened to the meaningless clatter of grunts and hisses, then disregarded the sounds. They formed, he had been told, a sort of elementary code of communication. He coughed disparagingly. Only some subhuman could bring himself to study such things.

Of course, he knew that some lacklanders could make vocal converse with the pseudomen and caravan-masters seemed to do it as a regular thing, but he could see no point in such effort. He could make his demands known without lowering himself by making idiotic noises.

His communicator crystals would

drive simple thoughts into even the thick skulls of his slaves. And he could—and did—thus get obedience and performance from those slaves by using normal, sensible means as befitted one of the race of true men.

And what would one want of the pseudomen other than obedience? Would one perhaps wish to discuss matters of abstract interest with these beast men? He regarded the scene with growing irritation.

Now, he remembered. It was one of those days of rest which some idiot in the Council had once sponsored. And a group of soft-headed fools had concurred, so that one now had to tolerate periodic days of idleness.

Times had changed, he thought. There had been a time when slaves were slaves and a man could expect to get work from them in return for his protection and support.

But even with these new, soft laws, herds must be guarded—especially with that null expanding as it was. Even some lackland idiot should be able to understand that much.

He turned his attention to the headman's hut.

The man was there. Surrounded by a few villagers, he squatted before his flimsy, frond-roofed hut, his mouth in grotesque motion. Now, he stopped his noisemaking and poised his head. Then he nodded, looking about the village.

Obviously, he was taking his ease and allowing his people to do as they would, without supervision.

Barra started to concentrate on the

surrogate, to make his wishes and his displeasure known. Then he turned impatiently from the crystal, seizing his staff. Efficient as the surrogates were, there were some things better attended to in person.

He got to his feet and strode angrily out of the study, sending a peremptory summons before him. As he entered the wide hallway, an elderly slave came toward him. Barra looked at the man imperiously.

"My cloak," he demanded, "and the cap of power."

He projected the image of his fiber cloak and of the heavy gold headpiece with its precisely positioned crystals, being careful to note the red, green and blue glow of the various jewels. Meticulously, he filled in details of the gracefully formed filigree which formed mounts to support the glowing spheres. And he indicated the padded headpiece with its incrustation of crystal carbon, so his servitor could make no mistake. The man was more sensitive than one of the village slaves, but even so, he was merely a pseudoman and had to have things carefully delineated for him.

As the man walked toward a closet, Barra looked after him unhappily. The heavy power and control circlet was unnecessary in the Residence, for amplifiers installed in the building took care of all requirements. But outside, in the village and fields, a portable source of power and control was indispensable and this heavy gold cap was the best device he had been able to find.

Even so, he hated to wear the circlet. The massive crystals mounted on their supporting points weighed a couple of pounds by themselves and though the gold insulating supports were designed as finely as possible, the metal was still massive and heavy. It was a definite strain on his neck muscles to wear the thing and he always got a headache from it.

For an instant, envy of the powerful psionics crossed his mind. There were, he knew, those who required no control or power devices, being able to govern and direct psionic forces without aid. But his powers, though effective as any, required amplification and when he went out of the Residence it was essential that he have the cap with him.

Proper and forceful handling of the things of the Estates, both animate and inanimate, demanded considerable psionic power and this made the large red power crystal at the center of his cap most necessary.

Besides, simultaneous control problems could be difficult—sometimes even almost impossible—without the co-ordinating crystals which were inset at the periphery of the headband.

And there was the possibility that he might meet some trespassing lacklander who might have to be impressed with the resources of the master of Kira Barra. He knew of more than one instance wherein a Master Protector had been overcome by some predatory lackland wanderer, who had then managed by one means or another to secure his own accession to

the estates of his victim. He smiled grimly.

Carelessness could be costly. He had proved that to his brother.

Kio Barra still remembered the first time he had quarreled violently with Boemar. He still remembered the gently, sympathetic smile and the sudden, twisting agony that had shot through him as his power crystal overloaded. The flare of energy had left him incapable of so much as receiving a strongly driven thought for many days.

He laughed. But, poor, soft fool that he had been, Boemar had carefully nursed his brother's mind back to strength again.

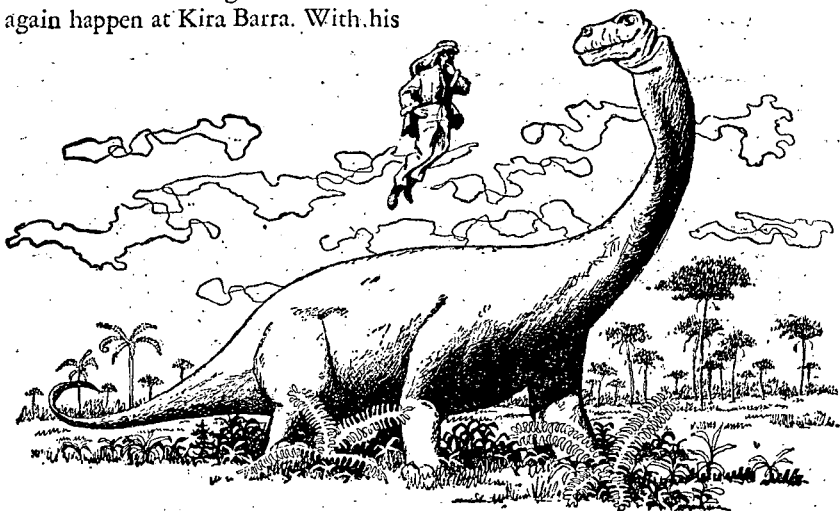
Yes, Boemar had been a powerful man, but a very unwise one. And he had forgotten the one great strength of his weaker brother—a strength that had grown as Leuwan aged. And so, it was Leuwan who was Kio Barra.

But such a thing would never again happen at Kira Barra. With his

controls and amplifiers, he was more than a match for the most powerful of the great psionics—so long as they didn't meet him with affectionate sympathy.

He stood silently as the servitor put the cap on his head and placed the cloak about his shoulders. Then, tucking his heavy duty distorter under his arm, he turned toward the outer door. The control jewels on his cap burned with inner fire as he raised himself a few inches from the floor and floated out toward the dock.

Not far from the forest shaded village of Tibara, logs had been lashed together to form a pier which jutted from the shore and provided a mooring for the hollowed logs used by men of the village in harvesting the fish of the lake. Several boats nested here, their bows pointing toward the fender logs of the pier. More were



drawn up on the gravel of the shore, where they lay, bottoms upward, that they might dry and be cleaned.

A few villagers squatted by their boats and near the pier. Others were by the nets which had been spread over the gravel to dry.

One large section of the pier was vacant. Always, this area was reserved for the use of the Lord of the Mountain Lake.

As Barra's boat sped through the water, he concentrated his attention on the logs of the pier, urging his boat to increasing speed. The sharp prow rose high in the water, a long vee of foam extending from it, to spread out far behind the racing boat.

As the bow loomed almost over the floating logs, Barra abruptly transferred his focus of attention to his right rear, pulling with all the power of the boat's drive crystals. The craft swung violently, throwing a solid sheet of water over pier and shore, drenching the logs and the men about them.

Then the bow settled and the boat lay dead in the water, less than an inch from the pier's fender logs.

Barra studied the space between boat and logs for an instant, then nodded in satisfaction. It was an adequate landing by anyone's standards.

His tension somewhat relieved, he raised himself from the boat and hovered over the dock.

Sternly, he looked at the villagers who were now on their feet, brushing water from their heads and faces. They ceased their movements, eying

him apprehensively and he motioned imperiously toward the boat.

"Secure it!"

The jewels of his control cap glowed briefly, amplifying and radiating the thought.

The villagers winced, then two of them moved to obey the command. Barra turned his attention away and arrowed toward the screen of trees, which partially concealed the village proper.

As he dropped to the ground in the clearing before the headman's hut, men and women looked at him, then edged toward their homes. He ignored them, centering his attention on the headman himself.

The man had gotten to his feet and was anxiously studying his master's face.

For a few seconds, Barra examined the man. He was old. He had been headman of the village under the old Master Protector, his father—and his brother had seen no reason for change, allowing the aging headman to remain in charge of the welfare of his people.

But this was in the long ago. Both of the older Kio Barra had been soft, slack men, seeking no more than average results. He, Leuwan, was different — more exacting — more demanding of positive returns from the Estates.

Oh, to be sure, Kira Barra had somehow prospered under the soft hands of his predecessors, despite their coddling of the subhuman pseudomen, but there had been many laxities which had infuriated Leuwan,

even when he was a mere youth. He frowned thoughtfully.

Of course, if those two hadn't been so soft and tolerant, he would have been something other than Lord of the Mountain Lake. He would have had to find other activities elsewhere. He dropped the line of thought.

This was not taking care of the situation.

He put his full attention on the man before him, driving a demand with full power of cap amplifier.

"Why are all your people idling away their time? Where are your herdsmen and guards?"

The headman's face tensed with effort. He waved a hand southward and made meaningless noises. Faintly, the thought came through to Barra.

"In south forest, with herd. Not idle, is rest day. Few work."

Barra looked angrily at the man. Did this fool actually think he could evade and lie his way out of the trouble his obvious failure to supervise had brought? He jabbed a thumb northward.

"What about that herd drifting toward the north river?" The two green communicator crystals gleamed with cold fire.

The headman looked confused. "Not north," came the blurred thought. "No herd north. All south forest, near swamp. One-hand boys watch. Some guard. Is rest day."

Unbelievably Barra stared at the pseudoman. He was actually persisting in his effort to lie away his failure. Or was he attempting some sort

of defiance? Had his father and brother tolerated such things as this, or was this something new, stemming from the man's age? Or, perhaps, he was trying the temper of the Master Protector, to see how far he could go in encroaching on authority.

He would deal with this—and now!

Abruptly, he turned away, to direct his attention to the central surrogate. It was equipped with a projector crystal.

The air in the clearing glowed and a scene formed in the open space. Unmistakably, it was the northern part of Kira Barra. The lake was shown, and sufficient landmarks to make the location obvious, even to a pseudoman. Carefully, Barra prevented any trace of the blank, swirling null from intruding on the scene. Perhaps the subhuman creature before him knew something of its properties, but there was no point in making these things too obvious.

He focused the scene on the stream and brought the approaching herd into the picture, then he flashed in his own face, watching. And he brought the view down closely enough to indicate that no human creature was near the herd. Finally, he turned his attention to the headman again.

"There was the herd. Where were your people?"

The old man shook his head incredulously, then turned toward one of the few men who still remained in the clearing.

He made a series of noises and the

other nodded. There were more of the growls and hisses, then the headman waved a hand southward and the other nodded again and turned away, to run into the trees and disappear.

The headman faced Barra again. "Send man," he thought laboriously. "Be sure herd is still south." He pointed toward the area where the projection had been.

"That not herd," he thought. "That other herd. Never see before."

Barra scowled furiously.

"You incapable inbecile! You dare to call your master a liar?"

He swung about, his furious gaze scanning the village. The pile of stones he had noticed before caught his attention. He focused on it.

A few stones rose into the air and flew toward the headman.

The old man faced about, his eyes widening in sudden fear. He dodged one of the flying stones, then turned to flee.

Barra flicked a second control on him briefly and the flight was halted.

More stones flew, making thudding sounds as they struck, then sailing away to gain velocity before they curved back to strike again.

At last, Barra turned from the litter of rock about the formless mass on the ground. He stared around the village, the fury slowly ebbing within him.

A few faces could be seen, peeping from windows and from between trees. He motioned.

"All villagers," he ordered. "Here before me. Now!" He waited impa-

tiently as people reluctantly came from their huts and out of the trees, to approach the clearing.

At last, the villagers were assembled. Barra looked them over, identifying each as he looked at him. Apart from the others, one of the younger herd guards stood close to his woman. Barra looked at him thoughtfully.

This man, he had noted, was obeyed by both herds and herdsmen. He had seen him at work, as he had seen all the villagers, and obviously, the man was capable of quick decisions—as quick, that was, as any pseudoman could be. He pointed.

"This village needs a new headman," he thought peremptorily. "You will take charge of it."

The man looked toward the huddled mass in the center of the litter of rocks, then looked back at his woman. A faint wave of reluctance came to Barra, who stared sternly.

"I said you are the new headman," he thought imperiously. "Take charge." He waved a hand.

"And get this mess cleaned up. I want a neat village from now on."

As the man lowered his head submissively, Barra turned away, rose from the ground, and drifted majestically toward the lake shore. He could check on the progress of the village from his view crystal back at the Residence.

The situation had been taken care of and there was no point in remaining in the depressing atmosphere of the village for too long.

Besides, there was that adventure

projection he hadn't finished. Perhaps it would be of interest now.

As the projection faded, Barra looked around the study, then got out of his chair and picked the crystal from its pedestal. He stood, looking at it approvingly for a few seconds, then went over to the cabinet and set it back in its case. For a time, he looked at the rest of the assortment.

Finally, he shook his head. Some of them, he would sell unscanned. The others—well, they could wait.

Yes, he thought, the record crystals had better be left alone for a while. He hadn't finished his inspection of the Estates and the situation at Tibara might not be an isolated case. It would be well to make a really searching inspection. He sighed.

In fact, it might be well to make frequent searching inspections.

Shortly after his accession to the Estates, he had seen to the defense of Kira Barra. He smiled wryly as he thought of the expense he had incurred in securing all those power and control crystals to make up his surrogate installations. But they had been well worth it.

He had been most thorough then, but that had been some time ago. His last full inspection had been almost a year ago. Lately he had been satisfying himself with spot inspections, not really going over the Estates from border to border.

Of course, the spot inspections had been calculated to touch the potential trouble spots and they had been productive of results, but there

might still be hidden things he should know about. This would have to be looked into.

He turned and went back to his chair, causing it to swivel around and face the view crystal.

There was that matter of Tibara, as far as that went. Possibly it would be well to count that herd and identify the animals positively.

Maybe the pasturage was getting poor and he would have to instruct the new headman to move to better lands. Those strays had looked rather thin, now that he thought of it.

Maybe some of the other long-necks had strayed from the main herd and he would have to have the headman send out guards to pick them up and bring them in.

He concentrated on the viewer, swinging its scan over to the swamp where he had driven that small herd.

They were still there, wallowing in the shallow water and grazing on the lush vegetation. He smiled. It would be several days before their feeble minds threw off the impression he had forced on them that this was their proper feeding place.

Idly, he examined the beasts, then he leaned forward, studying them more critically. They weren't the heavy, fat producers of meat normal to the Tibara herd. Something was wrong.

These were the same general breed as the Tibara long-necks, to be sure, but either their pasturage had been unbelievably bad or they had been recently run—long and hard. They looked almost like draft beasts.

He frowned. If these were from the Tibara herd, he'd been missing something for quite a while.

Thoughtfully, he caused the scan to shift. As he followed a small river, he noted groups of the huge, greenish gray beasts as they grazed on the tender rock ferns. Here and there, he noted herdsmen and chore boys either watching or urging the great brutes about with their noisemakers, keeping the herd together. He examined the scene critically, counting and evaluating. Finally, he settled back in his chair.

The herd was all here—even to the chicks. And they were in good shape. He smiled wryly.

Those brutes over in the swamp really didn't belong here, then. They must have drifted into the Estates from the null, and been on their way back. The headman— He shrugged.

"Oh, well," he told himself, "it was time I got a new headman for Tibara, anyway. And the discipline there will be tighter from now on."

He started to shift scan again, then sat up. The view was pulsing.

As he watched, the scan shifted automatically, to pick up the eastern border of the Estates. Stretching across the landscape was a thin line of draft saurians, each with its driver straddling its neck. The train had halted and a heavily armored riding lizard advanced toward the surrogate. Its rider was facing the hidden crystals.

As Barra focused on him, the man nodded.

"Master Protector?"

"That is correct." Barra activated his communicators. "I am Kio Barra, Master of the Estates Kira Barra."

The other smiled. "I am Dar Makun, independent caravan master," he announced. "The null turbulence forced me off route. Lost a few carriers and several days of time. I'd like to request permission to pass over your land. And perhaps you could favor me by selling some long-necks to fill my train again. The brutes I've got left are a little overloaded."

Barra considered. It was not an unusual request, of course. Certain caravans habitually came through, to do business with the Estates. Others were often detoured by the northern null and forced to come through Kira Barra.

Of course, the masters of the caravans were lacklanders, but they had given little trouble in the past. And this one seemed to be a little above the average if anything. In his own way, he was a man of substance, for an owner master was quite different from someone who merely guided another's train for hire.

The northern null was a menace, Barra thought, but it did have this one advantage. The regular caravans, of course, passed with the courtesy of the Estates, doing business on their way. But these others paid and their pasturage and passage fees added to the income of the Estates.

In this case, the sale of a few draft saurians could be quite profitable. He shifted the view crystals to allow two-way vision.

"To be sure." He waved a hand. "Direct your train due west to the second river. Cross that, then follow it southward. I will meet you at the first village you come to and we can kennel your slaves there and put your beasts to pasture under my herds-men. From there, it is a short distance to the Residence."

"Thank you." Dar Makun nodded again, then turned and waved an arm. Faintly, Barra caught the command to proceed.

He watched for a few minutes and examined the long train as it moved over the rolling land and lumbered into a forest. Then he shifted his scan to continue his inspection of the rest of the lands. It would be several hours before that caravan could reach Tibara and he could scan back and note its progress as he wished.

He relaxed in his chair, watching the panorama as the Estates unrolled before him. Now and then, he halted the steady motion of the scanner, to examine village or herd closely. Then he nodded in satisfaction and continued his inspection.

The Estates, he decided, were in overall good condition. Of course, there were a few corrections he would have to have made in the days to come, but these could be taken care of after the departure of the caravan.

There was that grain field over in the Zadabar section, for example. That headman would have to be straightened out. He smiled grimly. Maybe it would be well to create a vacancy in that village. But that could wait for a few days.

He directed the scan back to the eastern section, tracing the route he had given the caravan master. At last, the long line of saurians came into view and he watched their deceptively awkward gait as the alien crawled through a forest and came out into deep grass.

They were making far better progress than he had thought they would and he would have to get ready if he planned to be in Tibara when they arrived.

He was more careful of his dress than usual. This time, he decided, he'd want quite a few protective devices. One could never be quite sure of these caravan masters.

Of course, so long as they could plainly see the futility of any treacherous move, they were good company and easy people to deal with, but it would be most unwise to give one of them any opening. It just might be he would be the one who was tired of wandering.

He waited patiently as his slave attached his shield brooches and placed his control cap on his head, then he reached into the casket the man held for him and took out a pair of paralysis rings, slipping one on each of his middle fingers. At last, he dismissed the man.

He floated out of the building and let himself down on the cushions in the rear of his speedboat. Critically, he examined the condition of the craft. His yardboys had cleaned everything up, he noted. The canopy was down, leaving the lines of the boat clean and sharp.

He turned his attention to the power crystal and the boat drew out of its shelter, gained speed, and cut through the water to the distant shoreline.

With only part of his mind concentrated on controlling the boat, Barra looked across the lake. It was broad in expanse, dotted with islands, and rich in marine life.

Perhaps he might persuade this Dar Makun to pick up a few loads of dried lake fish, both for his own rations and for sale along the way to his destination. Some of the warehouses, he had noted, were well stocked and he'd have to arrange for some shipments soon.

The boat was nearing Tibara pier. He concentrated on setting it in close to the dock, then made his way to the eastern edge of the village, summoning the headman as he passed through the village center.

His timing had been good. The head of the long train was nearly across the wide grassland. For a moment, the thought crossed his mind that he might go out and meet the caravan master. But he discarded it. It would be somewhat undignified for the master of the estate to serve as a mere caravan guide. He stood, waiting.

He could see Dar Makun sitting between the armor fins of his riding lizard. The reptile was one of the heavily armored breed he had considered raising over in the northwest sector.

They were, he had been told, nor-

mally dryland creatures. Such brutes should thrive over in the flats, where the long-necks did poorly. He would have to consider the acquisition of some breeding stock.

The caravan master drew his mount to a halt and drifted toward the trees. Barra examined the man closely as he approached.

He was a tall, slender man, perfectly at ease in his plain trail clothing. A few control jewels glinted from his fingers and he wore a small shield brooch, but there was no heavy equipment. His distorter staff, Barra noted, was a plain rod, tipped by a small jewel. Serviceable, to be sure, but rather short in range. Barra's lip curled a trifle.

This man was not of really great substance, he decided. He probably had his entire wealth tied up in this one caravan and depended on his fees and on the sale of some few goods of his own to meet expenses.

As Dar Makun dropped to the ground near him, Barra nodded.

"I have instructed my headman to attend to your drivers and beasts," he said. "You have personal baggage?"

The other smiled. "Thank you! I'll have one of the boys bring my pack while the drivers pull up and unload. We can make our stack here, if you don't mind."

As Barra nodded in agreement, Dar Makun turned, waving. He drew a deep breath and shouted loudly, the sounds resembling those which Barra had often heard from his slaves. The Master Protector felt a twinge of disgust.

Of course, several of the caravan masters who did regular business at Kira Barra shouted at their slaves at times. But somehow, he had never become used to it. He much preferred to do business with those few who handled their pseudomen as they did their draft beasts—quietly, and with the dignity befitting the true race.

He waited till Dar Makun had finished with his growls and hisses. One of the caravan drivers had swung down and was bringing a fiber cloth bundle toward them. Barra looked at it in annoyance.

"This," he asked himself, "is his baggage?" He recovered his poise and turned to Dar Makun.

"He can put it in the boat," he told the man. "I'll have one of my people pick it up for you when we get to the island. Now, if you'll follow me, the pier is over this way." He turned and floated toward the dock.

As they pulled out into the lake, Dar Makun settled himself in the cushions.

"I never realized what a big lake this is," he remarked. "I've always made the northern swing through this part of the continent. Oh, I've seen the lake region from the hills, of course, but—" He looked at the water thoughtfully.

"You have quite a lot of fresh-water fish in there?"

Barra nodded. "We get a harvest."

Dar Makun closed his eyes, then opened them again. "I might deal with you for some of those," he com-

mented. "People out west seem to like fresh-water stuff." He looked at Barra closely.

"I'll have to open my cargo for you," he went on. "Might be a few items you'd be interested in."

Barra nodded. "It's possible," he said. "I always need something around the place." He speeded the boat a little.

The boat came to the dock and Barra guided his guest into the Residence and on into the study, where he activated the view crystal.

"There's still light enough for you to get a look at some of the herds," he told Dar Makun. "I believe you said you might need some more draft beasts."

Makun watched as the hills of Kira Barra spread out in the air before him.

"It's a good way to locate the herds and make a few rough notes," he admitted. "Of course, I'll have to get close to the brutes in order to really choose, though."

"Oh?"

"Fact. You see, these big lizards aren't all alike. Some of 'em are really good. Some of 'em just don't handle. A few of 'em just lie down when you drop the first sling on 'em." Makun nodded toward the projection.

"That big fellow over there, for instance," he went on. "Of course, he might slim down and make a good carrier. But usually, if they look like a big pile of meat, that's all they're good for. A lot of 'em can't even stand the weight of a man on their necks. Breaks 'em right down."

"A good carrier can handle a dozen tons without too much trouble, but some of these things have it tough to handle their own weight on dry land and you have to look 'em over pretty closely to be sure which is which. Can't really judge by a projection."

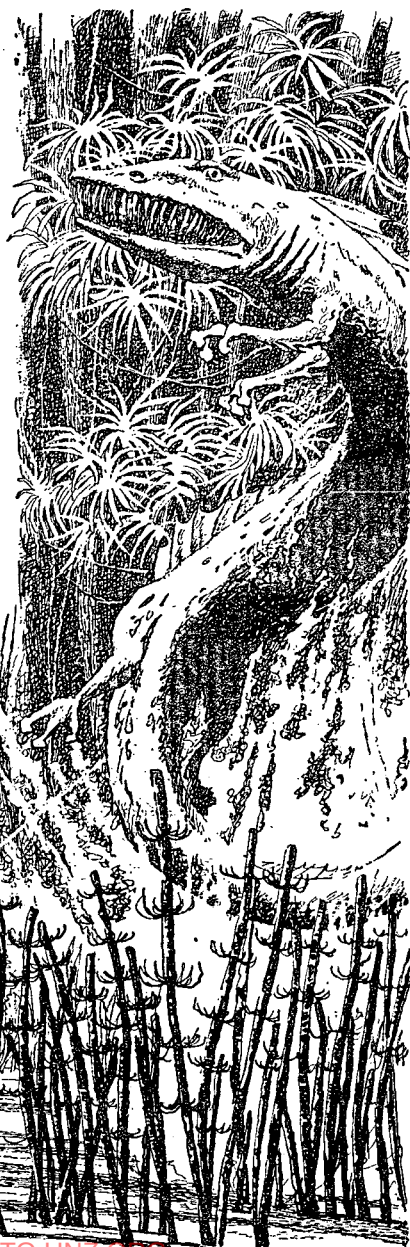
Barra looked at the man with slightly increased respect. At least, he knew something about his business. He shifted the viewer to the swamp.

Of course, he thought, there were draft animals over in the western sector. But this small herd was convenient.

"Well," he said, "I've got this little herd over here. They got away some time ago and lost a lot of weight before I rounded them up again."

Makun examined the projection with increased interest.

"Yeah," he remarked: "I'd like to



get out there in the morning and look those fellows over. I just might get the five I need right out there. Might even pick up a spare or two."

The swamp was a backwater of the lake, accessible by a narrow channel. Barra slowed the boat, easing it along through the still water. Here, the channel was clear, he knew, and it would soon widen. But there were some gravel bars a little farther along that could be troublesome if one were careless. And his attention was divided. He glanced at his companion.

Makun leaned against the cushions, looking at the thick foliage far overhead. Then he turned his attention to the banks of the channel. A long, greenish shape was sliding out of the water. He pointed.

"Have many of those around here?"

"Those vermin?" Barra looked at the amphibian. "Not too many, but I could do with less of them."

He picked up his distorter from the rack beside him and pointed it ahead of the boat. The sapphire glowed.

There was a sudden, violent thrashing in the foliage on the bank. The slender creature reared into the air, tooth-studded jaws gaping wide.

It rose above the foliage, emitting a hissing bellow. Then it curled into a ball and hung suspended in the air for an instant before it dropped back into the shrubbery with a wet plop.

Barra put the jewel-tipped rod back in its hanger.

"I don't like those nuisances," he explained. "They can kill a slave if he gets careless. And they annoy the stock." He tilted his head forward.

"There's the herd," he went on, "at the other end of this open water. I'll run up close and you can look them over if you wish."

Makun looked around, then shrugged. "Not necessary. I'll go ahead from here. Won't take me too long."

He lifted himself into the air and darted toward one of the huge sau-ri-ans. Barra watched as he slowed and drifted close to the brute's head, then hovered.

A faint impression of satisfaction radiated from his mind as he drifted along the length of the creature. He went to another, then to another.

At last, he returned to the boat.

"Funny thing," he commented. "A couple of my own carriers seem to have wandered clear through that null and mixed with your herd." He smiled.

"Stroke of luck. Too bad the rest didn't manage to stay with 'em, but you can't have everything. I'll pay you trespass fees on those two, of course, then I'd like to bargain with you for about four more to go with 'em. Got them all picked out and I can cur 'em out and drive them over to the train soon's we settle the arrangements."

Barra frowned.

"Now, wait a minute," he protested. "Of course, I'll bargain with you for any or all of this herd. But I'm in the breeding and raising busi-

ness, remember. I certainly can't give away a couple of perfectly good beasts on someone's simple say-so. I'd like a little proof that those two belong to your train before I just hand them over."

"Well, now, if it comes to that, I could prove ownership. Legally, too. After all, I've worked those critters quite a while and any competent psionic could—" Makun looked at Barra thoughtfully.

"You know, I'm not just sure I like having my word questioned this way. I'm not sure I like this whole rig-out. Seems to me there's a little explaining in order about now—and kind of an apology, too. Then maybe we can go ahead and talk business."

"I don't see any need for me to explain anything. And I certainly don't intend to make a apology of any kind. Not to you. I merely made a reasonable request. After all, these brutes are on my land and in my herd. I can find no mark of identification on them, of any kind." Barra shrugged.

"As a matter of fact, I don't even know yet which two you are trying to claim. All I ask is indication of which ones you say are yours and some reasonable proof that they actually came from your train. Certainly, a mere claim of recognition is . . . well, you'll have to admit, it's a little thin."

Makun looked at him angrily.

"Now, you pay attention to me. And pay attention good. I'm not stupid and I'm not blind. I can see all those jewels you're loaded down

with and I know why you're wearing them. They tell me a lot about you, you can be sure of that. Don't think I haven't noticed that patronizing air of yours, and don't think I've liked it. I haven't and I don't.

"I know you're scared. I know you're worried to death for fear I'm going to pull something on you. I spotted that the first time I talked to you." He paused.

"Oh, I've been trying to ignore it and be decent, but I've had about enough. I've been in this caravan business for a long time. I've dealt square and I'm used to square dealing. Now, you've been putting out a lot of side thoughts about thievery and I don't appreciate being treated like some sneak thief. I'm not about to get used to the idea, either."

"Now, you'd better get the air cleared around here and then we can talk business. Otherwise, there's going to be a lot of trouble."

Barra felt a surge of fury rising above his fear. This lacklander clown actually dared to try to establish domination over a member of the ruling class? He breathed deeply.

"I don't have—"

"All right, listen to me, you termite. You've come way too far out of your hole. Now, you just better crawl back in there fast, before I turn on the lights and burn your hide off."

The surge of mental power blazing at Barra was almost a physical force. He cringed away from it, his face wrinkling in an agony of fright. Makun looked at him contemptuously.

"All right. Now, I'll tell you—"

Smoothly, Barra's hand went to the haft of his distorter. The jewel seemed to rise of its own accord as it blazed coldly.

For an infinitesimal time, Makun's face reflected horrified comprehension before it melted into shapelessness.

Barra put the distorter back in its rack, looking disgustedly at the mess on the cushions. There was nothing for it, he thought. He'd have to destroy those, too. Cleaning was out of the question. He shook his head.

Like all these strong types, this Makun had neglected a simple principle. With fear as his constant companion, Barra had been forced to learn to live with it.

Extreme mental pressure was merely another form of fright. It could paralyze a braver soul—and often did. It merely made Barra miserably uncomfortable without disturbing his control. And the hatred that was always in him was unimpaired—even amplified by the pounding terror.

The more thoroughly Barra was frightened, the more effectively he attacked.

He leaned back in his seat, letting the drumming of his heart subside. Eventually, he would recover enough to guide the boat out of the swamp and back to the Residence.

Tomorrow? Well, he would have to inventory the freight the man had carried. He would have to check those draft beasts. Perhaps he could discern the hidden identification Makun had mentioned.

And he would have to make disposition of some twenty slaves. He summoned up a smile.

Now that he thought of it, this affair could be turned to profit. After all, Dar Makun had been diverted from his route and he had lost some of his train. And caravans had been known to disappear in the vicinity of turbulent nulls.

All he had to do was deny knowledge of the fate of Dar Makun's caravan if there were any inquiry. Oh, certainly, he could tell any inquirer, Dar Makun had arrived. He had stayed overnight and then taken his departure, saying something about cutting around the null and back to his normal, northern swing.

He was feeling better now. He turned his attention to the control crystal and the boat swung about, to make its way back toward the lake.

It took longer than he had thought it would. It was evening of the day after the death of Dar Makun when Barra turned in his seat and raised his hand, then waved it in a wide circle.

A quickly directed thought halted his mount and he looked about once more, at the thick forest.

This clearing was as close to the village of Celdalo as he wanted to come. The villagers never came into this heavy screen of trees, but beyond the forest, there might be some who would watch and wonder. He smiled grimly.

Of course, it didn't make too much difference what slaves might think

—if they could think at all, but there was no reason to leave unnecessary traces of the day's work.

He swung about in his cushions and looked back at the line of draft beasts. They were swinging out of line now, to form a semicircle, facing the trees ahead.

He impressed an order on his mount to stand, then lifted himself out of the cushioned seat between the armor fins. For a few seconds, he hovered, looking down at the beast he had been riding.

Yes, he thought, he would do well to raise a few of these creatures. They were tractable and comfortable to ride. A good many caravan masters might be persuaded to get rid of their less comfortable mounts in exchange for one of these, once they had tried a day's march.

One by one, the big saurians came to the forest edge and entered the clearing, then crouched, to let their drivers swing to the ground. Barra looked at the lead driver.

"Make your cargo stack over here," he ordered, "at this side of the clearing. You will wait here for your master."

The man looked confused. A vague, questioning thought came from him. It wasn't really a coherent thought, but just an impression of doubt—uncertainty. Barra frowned impatiently.

It had been much the same when he had ordered this man to load up back at Tibara. Perhaps it was no wonder Dar Makun had been forced to learn vocalization if this was the

best slave he could find to develop into his headman.

Carefully, he formed a projection. It showed the carriers gathering in their unloading circles. He made one of the projections turn and drop its head over another's back. The wide mouth opened and stubby, peg teeth gripped the handling loop of a cargo sling. Then the long-neck swiveled back, to repeat the performance.

Barra watched as the man before him nodded in obedient understanding. He shot out a sharp, peremptory order.

"Do it, then! Do it as shown."

The man made noises, then turned, shouting at the other drivers.

Barra watched as the stack of cargo grew. At last, the final sling was positioned and a heavy cloth cover was dropped over the great piles. Barra looked at the headman.

"Bring your drivers close," he ordered. "I have something for them to see."

Again, there was the moment of confusion, but this time the man had gathered the main sense of the command. He turned again, shouting.

The drivers looked at each other questioningly, then moved slowly forward, to form a tight group before Barra, who watched until they were in satisfactory position.

He concentrated on the group for a few seconds, starting the formation of a projection to his left.

As the air glowed and started to show form, the eyes of the drivers swung toward it. Barra smiled tightly and swung his distorter up. The

crystal flamed as he swept it across the group of slaves.

He kept the power on, sweeping the distorter back and forth until all that remained was a large pool of slime which thinned, then oozed into the humus. At last, he tucked the rod back under his arm and examined the scene.

There was the pile of goods. There were the carrier beasts. But no man or pseudoman remained of the caravan. His smile broadened.

Once he had sorted this cargo and moved it to the Residence and to various warehouses about the Estates, all traces of Dar Makun and his train would be gone.

To be sure, a few villages would find that their herds had increased, but this was nothing to worry about. He sighed.

It had been a hard day and it would be a hard night's work. He would have to forget his dignity for the time and do real labor. But this was necessity. And there was plenty of profit in it as well.

So far as the rest of the world might know, Dar Makun and his caravan had left Kira Barra to cut back to the northern swing. And the turbulent null had swallowed them without trace.

He turned away. He would have to bring work boats in to the nearby beach. Their surrogates were already attuned and ready, and one of them had been equipped with an auxiliary power crystal. He would need that.

As the boats arrived at village piers, the various headmen would

merely follow instructions as given by the boat's surrogates. He would be done with this operation in a few hours.

The days went on, became weeks, then hands of weeks. Little by little, Barra changed his attitude toward caravan masters. Once, he had been cautious about dealing with them, allowing only a chosen few to do business within his borders.

Now, however, he had found a whole, new source of income. And a new sense of power had come to him. Caravans were more than welcome at Kira Barra.

He leaned back on his new chair, enjoying the complete ease with which it instantly shaped to fit his body. It was precisely like hovering a short distance above the floor, yet there was no strain of concentration on some control unit. He allowed himself to relax completely and turned his attention to the viewer crystal.

It was new, too. The old one of his father's which he had brought to the new Residence had seemed quite inadequate when the Residence was redone. This new viewer had been designed for professional use. It was a full two feet in diameter and could fill thousands of cubic feet with solid projection.

Animals, trees, pseudomen, all could be brought before him as though physically present in the study. Too, it was simpler than the old one and much more accurate in its control. He sighed.

The Estates had prospered. Of course, he had been cautious. Many caravans had come to Kira Barra and left again, their masters highly pleased with the fair dealings of the Estates. Several had returned, time and time again.

There had been others who had come through during times when the null was in turbulence and it was from these that he had taken his harvest. He had been particular in his choices, making careful evaluation before taking any action.

By this time, his operation was faultless—a smooth routine which admitted of no error. He smiled as he remembered his fumbling efforts with the first caravan and his halting improvements when he had dealt with the next. What were those fellows' names?

He shrugged. He could remember that first fellow practically begging him to take action and he could remember his own frightened evaluation of the situation after the first step. He had gone over a whole, long line of alternative choices, rejecting them one by one until the inevitable, ideal method of operation had come out. He smiled.

When he had finally settled on his general method, it had been elegantly simple. But it had been very nearly perfect. Basically, he was still using the same plan.

Now, of course, it was smother and even more simplified. There were two general routines involved.

Most caravan masters were treated with the greatest of consideration.

They were allowed to pass through the Estates with only nominal fees and invited to avail themselves of the courtesy of the Estates at any time in the future. If trades with the Estates were involved, the fees were waived, of course. And many of them had returned, bringing goods and information, as well as taking away the produce of the Estates.

Then, there were those caravans which came during turbulences in the null and which seemed worthwhile to the now practiced eyes of Kio Barra. These were the ones ripe for harvest. Their owners had been offered the courtesy of the Estates—and more.

They had been taken for sight-seeing tours—perhaps of the lake—perhaps to see valuable carrier stock which could be had at bargain rates.

Then, in complete privacy, a distorter beam had made neat disposition of them.

Their goods had been distributed through the various warehouses and later disposed of through the safe channels which Barra had carefully cultivated. Their slaves, of course, had been eliminated.

Barra regretted this waste of valuable property, but this way there could be no leak of information and no inquiry could be successful.

There had been an inquiry at one time, but that had been in the earlier days.

The inquirer had gone away with no suspicion in his mind. He had examined the null from the hills and had agreed with Kio Barra that it was

indeed a menace. He had listened sympathetically to Barra's rueful comments about slaves and stock which had drifted into the null, never to be heard from again.

Barra activated the view crystal. It was time for another inspection of the Estates.

The projection formed and Barra was suddenly in a wood, looking across a wide field. Grain waved in the breeze and here and there, the silhouettes of both long-neck and fin-back could be seen, half hidden by grass and trees.

The scanner progressed, crossing the field and continuing to another forest, operating on the route impressed on it. Barra relaxed as he watched. As the scan progressed through field, swamp and forest, he nodded in satisfaction. The Estates were in far better shape than ever before.

Suddenly, he halted the scan, looking critically at the scene. He was in the central clearing of Tibara. And the village didn't match with the standards he wanted.

He looked critically at the huts. They were becoming run-down. It had been too long since the roof thatches had been replaced. Uprights were bending a little here, a trifle out of plumb there.

There were broken stones again in the well curb and the pile of stone brought for repair wasn't neatly stacked. He frowned.

This was not the first time he'd had to take a firm hand in Tibara.

Of course, he had replaced headmen in other villages—more than once in some cases. But Tibara was working on its third headman. There was something really wrong in that village.

To be sure, Tibara was the village where most caravan slaves were quartered. A lodge had been built there for that purpose and it was in frequent use. Naturally, it was maintained by the villagers. But that was even less excuse for shoddiness. This should be the neatest, best kept village in all Kira Barra. It wasn't.

The frown deepened. This time, Tibara was going to be cleaned up, and he'd keep his attention on it. The village would stay clean if the villagers had to spend every second of their time on it when they weren't taking care of their herds, their boats, and their guest lodge.

And there'd be no slacking in those other areas, either.

He looked around the clearing. There were, he was forced to admit, no idlers about at the moment. The only people he could see were women and children. And the women were busily occupied.

Again, he studied the scene. The men would be coming in from their fields and from the lake in another hour. He would examine a few other villages, then return his attention to Tibara.

Wearily, Retonga, headman of Tibara, pulled himself to a sitting position. He looked over to the other side of the room. Mir was already on her

feet. She smiled at him uncertainly.

"It's morning," she said. "Rest day, at last."

"Yes." Retonga closed his eyes for an instant. It had been bad for her, too, he knew. He'd probably been pretty hard to live with these past few days. He sighed.

"Rest day," he mused, "But it means nothing. There's still work. There's always work these days." He got to his feet.

"I wish I were just a herd boy—in some other village." He went to the door and looked out.

Someone had disturbed the pile of building stones. Children had been playing in the clearing the night before and the earth was scuffed up. Bits of wood and cloth lay scattered here and there.

He looked at the houses. Folshan's roof was sagging a trifle, he noticed. And there were a couple of dolls lying outside his door. He shook his head and went out into the clearing.

Old Tamiso was squatting by the well. Retonga walked over to him.

"Your stone pile," he said. "A few of the stones are scattered."

The old man looked over, then shrugged.

"I just picked this one out," he explained. "When I get it laid, I'll have to get another. I'll straighten the pile when I finish here."

Retonga smiled wearily. "And if the master sees your pile now?"

Tamiso pushed himself to his feet, rubbing his back thoughtfully.

"Yes," he said. "The master can give great pain, and it seems he is

always watching these days." He walked over to the stones.

For a moment, Retonga watched as he rearranged his pile, then he turned, tilting his head back.

"Awaken," he shouted. "For the sun looks down and shall he find us asleep?"

A head poked out of a door.

"It's a rest day. We'll be at it soon enough, but what's the hurry?"

Retonga shook his head. "I know it's rest day. You know it's rest day. But there's one who forgets these things. Remember the other evening?"

Folshan winced and Retonga pointed.

"Better get those dolls picked up. And there's that roof of yours. I'll give you a hand with it."

Folshan came out of his hut, then looked back.

"No," he said slowly. "You're headman. Remember how that happened? Let the master catch you helping with the work and we'll need yet another headman." He shook his head.

"This time, it could be me." He bent over to pick up the toys his daughter had left.

"Kina," he called, "tell Chama to keep her toys picked up, or she might be needing a new father." He turned again.

"I'll get Kesonta to help with that roof. It'll be straight in an hour or so."

Retonga looked after him for a moment, then caught the eyes of a couple of the women. He made a



sweeping motion toward the earth of the clearing, then walked back to his own door.

He turned, inspecting each detail of the village.

"Let's see. Is there anything else for the master to find wrong?" Again, he examined each house closely.

At last, he turned away, walking toward a path.

"He'll probably be looking at the waterfront, too," he told himself, "and at that lodge."

He walked slowly along the path, checking the forest floor as he went. As he got to the beach, he looked toward the pier, then winced.

A few hundred yards out in the lake, a high wedge of water was sweeping toward him. At the apex of the vee, he could see the shape of a

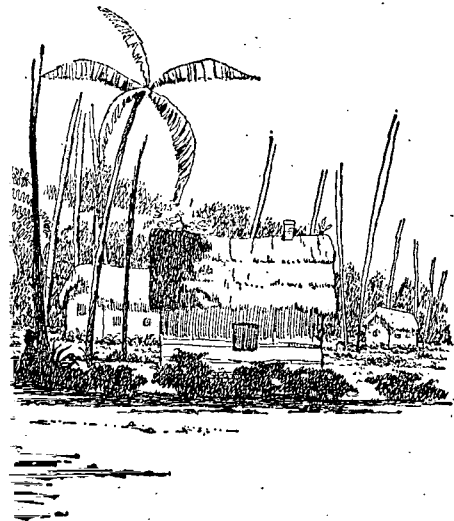
boat, its bow riding high over the water.

"Oh, no," he groaned to himself. "Trouble again!" He waited.

As the wave splashed to the pier, he dashed forward to secure the boat. Kio Barra merely glanced at him. Briefly, he caught the impression of a wide field. A line of great beasts were crossing it, their long necks bobbing as they walked. He nodded in understanding.

A caravan was coming in. That would be trouble, of course, but of minor nature. He turned, to follow the glittering figure as it floated toward the path and on, into the village.

As the caravan came to a stop, Naran's beast bent its knees and



crouched. He swung himself to the ground.

He was getting the hang of this, he told himself. At first, he had been forced to fight an almost uncontrollable compulsion to float down normally, but now it seemed quite sensible to grab the heavy fiber strands and swing forward till his feet were solidly on the ground. He spun about.

"All right," he shouted. "Take your reins. Form your unloading circles on me. We'll be here for a day or two."

He watched as the slings were lifted from the brutes' backs, then turned his attention to the man who was greeting Dar Girdek.

So this was the Lord of the Mountain Lake. He shook his head. The fellow glittered almost from head to foot. Naran examined the jewelry ap-

praisingly. He wore a fourth-order cap. They didn't make them any heavier than that one. And if there was a device that had been left out, he had never heard of it.

In addition, he could identify three heavy-duty shields, a power levitator, a handful of destructo and paralysis rings, and a projector medallion capable of forming several hundred cubic feet of solid, detailed illusion. He shook his head.

This man must have spent the entire income of his estate for several years in assembling this array. There was enough there to outfit a battle group of competent psionics.

"If this guy needs all that stuff just to get by, he's as near to psionic zero as you can get," Naran told himself. "Either that, or he's loaded with a power compulsion that's never been equalled." He frowned.

"Or both," he added thoughtfully. He looked again at the blaze of jewelry.

Faintly, he could sense the sour feel of fear. It acted as a carrier for a mixture of hatred, envy, and contemptuous hauteur. Naran whistled softly. There was more, too. He wished he dared try a probe, but with all that arsenal of psionic crystalware, it would be unwise.

"Hit those shields of his and I'd bounce off with a noise like a million bells," he thought. He turned away.

He'd have to keep his own mind fully hooded around here. He looked back again, glancing at the distorter rod Barra carried. His eyes widened a little.

"Given adequate drive, that thing would stop a Fifth Planet battleship." He grinned.

"Arm a couple of hundred men with those things and they could go out and take the Fifth apart, bit by bit. Then we wouldn't have to worry about those people and their mechanical gadgets."

He dragged his attention back to the business at hand, tapping in on Dar Girdek's thoughts.

"... And we can tour the Estates later today," Barra was saying. "I may be able to show you some worthwhile goods, as well as a few good draft beasts to carry them."

Naran risked a light probe, taking advantage of Barra's diverted attention.

He had been right, he thought. It was the "or both." He shook his head. The guy was almost pathetic. Obviously, he wanted to be the greatest man on the planet. And equally obviously, without his amplifier jewels, he'd be little stronger psionically than one of Dar Girdek's drivers.

As Dar Girdek followed his host toward the village, Naran turned his attention back to his drivers. He would have to make camp and then get together with that village headman. There'd be plenty of arrangements they would have to make.

He was surprised at the arrangements Retonga had already made. There wasn't much question about it, the entertainment of caravans was familiar business with this headman. He knew all the problems—and their answers.

Of course, Dar Girdek had told him about the hospitality of Kira Barra, but this had to be seen to be believed. He spent his first really restful night in weeks.

The next morning, he walked slowly along the path to the drivers' lodge, paying little attention to his surroundings. Somehow, in spite of the reception given the caravan, he was uneasy.

He recalled his conversation with Retonga the night before.

The man had asked questions about the conditions of the trail. He had been curious about the treatment of the drivers by the master of the train. Then he had shaken his head, looking out over his village.

"It is far different here. This is an estate of death and terror, and our master is the very lord of these. I was a child when his father died, but I think things were different then." He had looked searchingly at Naran.

"I've never mentioned these things before," he went on. "But there's something—" He had looked down at the ground, then up again.

"Our master became Kio through the death of his brother," he went on, "and it was through the deaths of other headmen that I was placed in charge of this village." He had glanced back into the door of his hut.

"I had no part in causing those deaths. The life of a headman here in Tibara is short and none but a fool would fight for this position of mine. It is not a good one. The master's demands are heavy and his hand is even heavier."

This didn't match with the reputation of Kio Barra as a considerate host—a fair man to do business with. It made him wonder.

Had his brother actually ever left this place? But if not, where were his drivers? What had happened to his train of draft brutes? How had the cargo he carried been disposed of?

Oh, of course, he knew there were caravan masters who would accept freight and ask a minimum of questions. Goods could be disposed of. And this was a breeding estate. The slaves? He shook his head. Too simple!

He brought himself back to the present, looking thoughtfully at the drivers' lodge ahead of him. Then he probed gently, trying to establish rapport with Dar Girdek. The man could be in real danger.

He frowned and probed with more force. There was nothing. The frown deepened.

After his talk with Retonga, he had established rapport with the caravan master, but the older man had attached no importance to his suspicions.

"No," he had thought back, "you are seeing a robber behind every rock now. Kio Barra is a tough master, of course. He's got a big estate here, and he really keeps it up to the mark. He's a good host and a really good man to deal with—liberal trader. Remember, I know this guy. I've been here before." There had been the impression of a smile.

"Besides, this guy's harmless, re-

member? Sure, he's a businessman. But if he should try anything violent, I could take care of him without taking time out to think about it." A final, dismissing thought had come.

"Look, forget about it, will you? If you had to suspect someone or dirty work, pick on some of those northerners. Kio Barra's too well known for fair dealing. I'll make a deal with him, then we can go up to the northern swing and really look around to see if we can find any trace of that caravan of your brother's."

Naran kicked at the trail. Dar Girdek was a good trader and a successful caravan master. He knew goods and their value, and he was expert in handling beasts and drivers. But he had never been too sensitive. And he'd absolutely refused to wear a probe amplifier.

"Look," he'd thought disgustedly, "how would you like to do business with some guy that wore a great, big, yellow headlight to tell you he wanted to poke around in your mind?"

Naran put his foot on the lowest rung of the short ladder leading to the lodge door.

Unless he was badly mistaken, he knew now where his brother had gone. And now Dar Girdek had joined him. The details? He shrugged.

They were unimportant. But what was next? What would be the next step in Barra's plans? And what could be done about this guy? He climbed the ladder and went into the lodge.

Of course, if the Council found out about this, they could deal with the situation. All they'd need would be a little proof and Kio Barra would be well and promptly taken care of. But how would someone get word out?

The estate was loaded with surrogates, he knew that. A caravan—even a single man—would find it impossible to either enter or leave without the knowledge and consent of the Master Protector. He smiled.

He could just visualize Kio Barra letting anyone out with proof of his activities. The smile faded.

A distant projection? There were those surrogates again. They were broad tuned and he knew it. They'd flare like a field of beacons.

Of course, he could get out a flash appeal and it would be heard. He grinned.

Now, there was a nice way to commit suicide. There'd be no time for help to arrive, he was sure of that. And no shield would stand up under that heavy-duty distorter, even if Barra could only summon a minimum of power to operate it. He shook his head, looking around the room.

Drivers were beginning to stir and get to their feet. Naran looked at the flunky.

"Better get with it, Bintar," he said. "Going to be a bunch of hungry men around you in a couple of minutes."

"Yeah." The man started out the door, yawning. "Got to eat, if we

don't do anything else." He climbed down the ladder.

Naran glanced at the drivers.

"Soon's we've eaten," he said, "I'd like to check up on the long-necks. See whether they've wandered during the night. I'd hate to have them get mixed up with the village herd."

A driver looked around at him.

"Aw," he protested, "the master probably pinned 'em down good before he left. Besides, he can identify 'em anyway. They won't go far—not with those herd boys' running around."

"Sure," Naran told him. "The master would really like spending half a day cutting out his long-necks from the village herd. And how about that Master Protector? What would he think of our caravan?"

The other looked at him disgustedly. "Aw, who cares about that? Why worry about what one of them witchmen thinks about another? Long's we don't get twisted around, what's the difference?"

Naran growled to himself. He'd blundered on that one. There was no answer to that argument that he could present. He had learned to understand—and in some measure sympathize with—the deep-seated resentment of the non-psi for the psionic. The non-psionics felt they were just as good men as anyone, yet here were these psionics with their incomprehensible powers. And there was nothing to be done about it except obey.

Of course, they didn't like it—or their masters.

As far as that went, the caravan herd was unimportant now. The only trouble was Retonga. If the herds were mixed, he would be in real trouble.

"Well," he said aloud, "I'm not about to get the master to spinning. Long's we keep him happy, we'll all be a lot better off. As I said, right after breakfast. I want everyone out on the herd." He started to turn away.

"Aagh," growled the other. "Why don't you face it? You're just one of those guys likes to toss orders around and make people jump. It's about time someone showed you a few things."

Naran turned back. Rosel had been resentful ever since the caravan had formed. He had expected to be lead driver on this trip and he'd made no effort to hide his fury and disappointment at being displaced in favor of a newcomer.

For an instant, Naran considered. There was no point in continuing his masquerade any further. Dar Girdek was gone and he'd have to take the caravan back anyway—if he could work his way out of here, past Barra.

If he couldn't get out—if he joined his brother and Dar Girdek—it would make no difference what the caravan drivers thought.

He could put this man in his place right now. Then, he could give him the job of lead driver.

But there was something else to think of. If he got the train out of here, he would have to work with this guy. And there would always be

an even greater resentment added to the normal fear and hatred of the psionic. That could demoralize the whole train. Naran sighed.

Rosel had put his feelings in the open now and Naran would have to play out the role he had assumed.

He crossed the room to confront Rosel. Abruptly, he thrust a hand out. The other made a grab for it and Naran moved smoothly forward, locking the grasping hand.

Quickly, he extended a leg and threw Rosel over it. As the man hit the floor, Naran retained his grip and brought his other hand over, twisting the man's arm. His foot went out, to smack into the man's face, pinning him to the floor. Slowly, he put pressure on the prisoned hand.

"Once more," he said coldly, "I'm going to have everyone out on the herd right after breakfast. Now, do you want to go out and work with 'em, or do I keep winding up on this thing and then have 'em load you up with the rest of the spare gear?"

"Aw, look." Rosel's voice was muffled. "Didn't mean a thing. I was just making a crack."

"Yeah, sure." Naran's voice was scornful. "Just having a little fun before breakfast. Now you listen to me. So long as I'm lead driver, you're going to do what I say—when I say it. If you give me any more trouble, I'll pull your head off and make you carry it under one arm. Got it?"

"Ow! Yeah, I got it. You're the lead driver."

Naran released his pressure and stepped back.

"All right," he said. "Let's forget it. Now, we'll get breakfast over with and then we'll take care of the long-necks. You take the drivers out, Rosel. I'm going to make some arrangements in the village. Be with you later." He swung away.

Barra looked at his reflection with satisfaction. It was too bad, he thought, that he didn't have some companion to appreciate his wealth and power. He examined his equipment carefully.

Everything was clean. Everything was in order. There was no device lacking.

Proudly, he looked down at the huge, yellow pendant he was wearing for the first time. It was funny, he thought, that he had never considered a probe unit before. Now that he thought of it, this was a most satisfactory device. Now, he could look into his villagers' minds and see clearly what lay there. Even, he could get some ideas of the intentions of visiting caravan masters.

Fitting the device and becoming familiar with it had been hard work, of course, but he had mastered it. And today, he could wear the jewel and use it. It would make the day's work easier.

He activated his levitator, floated to his boat, and pulled it away from its shelter, setting the course toward Tibara.

The hard part of this operation was over, he thought. The rest was simple routine.

This caravan master had given him

a bit more trouble than some of the others, but his final reaction had been just like all the others. He smiled.

That flash of incredulity, followed by sudden, horrified comprehension, then blankness, was becoming perfectly familiar. In fact, even this was simple routine.

He wondered if he might be able to extend just a little. Perhaps he could operate on a wider scale. There should be some way he could work out to take over a neighboring estate and go from there.

Surely, there must be some outlet for his abilities, beyond mere increase in the wealth of Kira Barra. And there must be some way to gain a companion of sorts. He would have to think that over.

He swung the boat to the pier and floated away, grandly ignoring the pseudomen who hurried to secure his lines.

He examined the village with approval as he stood in the center of the clearing. There had been a great improvement since he had taken that headman in hand. Perhaps this fellow would be satisfactory—might even learn to take some pride in the appearance of his village—if, that is, a pseudoman were capable of pride.

He looked over toward the headman's hut.

The fellow had come out, followed by the lead driver of the caravan. Good, that would save the trouble of hunting the fellow out.

He concentrated on the caravan slave.

"Your master has decided to remain at the Residence for a time," he thought confidently. "You may have your drivers load up and move to a more permanent location."

The answering thought was unexpectedly distinct.

"This location looks as though it were designed for a caravan's stay. Where's Dar Girdek?"

Barra looked at the man in surprise. What was this? This fellow didn't think like any pseudoman. Had Dar Girdek somehow managed to persuade a halfman to act as his lead driver? But why?

He drew back a little, tensing. There was something wrong here.

"Now, look," persisted the man before him. "I'd like to see Dar Girdek. I'd like to know why I haven't been able to get in touch with him this morning."

Barra blinked, then activated the new probe. He would have to find out what this man knew—how much others might know. Abruptly, he felt a violent return of the fear sickness which had temporarily subsided with the death of Dar Girdek.

The probe was met by an impenetrable barrier. Barra's eyes widened. This man was no halfman, either. He was one of the great psionics. Frantically, Barra's thoughts retraced the past.

Was this an investigator from the Council? Was he, Kio Barra, suspect? But how had any leak occurred? The fear grew, till he could almost smell the sour stench of it. And with it, came a buoying lift of pure fury.

This man may have unmasked him, to be sure. The Council might even now be sending men to take him, but this spy would never know the results of his work. He would profit nothing here.

He flipped the distorter from under his arm.

As the Master Protector started to raise his distorter, Naran felt a sharp twinge of regret. He had resigned himself to this, and had made his preparations, but he hated to leave Barra to someone else. Of course, the man had no chance now. The disturbance he had keyed himself to make if he were hit with a distorter would be heard by every scholar in Ganiadur, and by half the Council. But—

Suddenly, he felt a sort of pity for the killer before him. The guy wasn't really altogether to blame. He'd been living for all these years with everything against him.

Born into a psionic family, he had been the family skeleton—a thing of disgrace—to be hidden from the rest of the world and given tolerant protection.

And when this barely tolerated being had managed somehow to gain power and get amplifying devices? Well—

The crystal was leveled at him now. He looked at it indifferently, thinking of the man who held it.

"Poor, lonesome weakling!"

Abruptly, the clearing was lit up by a blinding red glare. Naran closed his eyes against the searing light.

Seconds went by and he opened his eyes again, looking about the village in confusion.

Had he somehow managed to retain full consciousness of ego, even after being reduced by a distorter beam? Was there a release into some other state of being? He had felt no—

He looked at Kio Barra. The man stood, slack-faced, still holding his distorter rod, but gradually allowing it to sag toward the ground. Naran shook his head.

"Now, what goes on?"

He probed at the man's mind.

There was consciousness. The man could think, but the thoughts were dim and blurred, with no trace of psionic carrier. The control and amplifier jewels he wore had lost their inner fire—were merely dull, lifeless reflectors of the sunlight. This man could do no more toward bringing life to the jewels than could the village headman—perhaps, even less.

Naran looked at him in unbelieving confusion, then turned as a sudden, screaming thought struck his mind.

"A stinking, high-nosed witchman! And we thought he was one of us! Ate with him. Argued with him. Even fought with him. I've got to get away. Got to!"

There was desperation in the thought. And there were hatred overtones, which blended, then swelled.

As the terrorized ululation went on, Naran swung his head, locating the source. He'd have to do something about that—fast. The fellow

would really demoralize the caravan now—even infect the big saurians—cause a stampede.

This guy had some power of projection and his terror was intensifying it till anyone could receive the disturbing impulses, even though complete understanding might be lacking.

Naran lifted himself from the ground, arrowing rapidly toward the caravan, his mind already forming the thoughts which he hoped would soothe the frantic fear and—at least to some degree—allay the frenzy of hatred that swelled and became stronger and stronger.

Barra could wait.

As Barra swung his distorter to bear, he concentrated on the violent pulse needed to trigger the jewel, his mind closed to all else. He turned his attention on his target.

Suddenly, he recognized the curiously tender expression which had formed on the face of the man before him.

Frantically, he tried to revise his thoughts—to recall the blaze of energy he had concentrated to build up.

It was too late.

With a sense of despair, he recognized the sudden, lifting, twisting agony that accompanied the flare of the overloaded power crystal. For an eternal instant, his universe was a blinding, screaming, red nightmare.

The flare died and he watched dully as the unharmed man before him looked about unbelievably, then

looked back to carefully examine him. "Oh," he told himself dully, "I suppose they'll take care of me, but what of it? They'll put me somewhere. I'll lose everything. It'll be just like the place Boemar thought of sending me, when I—"

Furiously, he tried to summon some tiny bit of energy to activate the distorter.

Nothing happened.

The man whose pity had destroyed him suddenly frowned, then turned and darted away. Dully, Barra watched him, then he turned, to look around the village. His face contorted in new terror.

Some of the village men were moving toward him, curious expressions on their faces. He backed away from them and turned.

A few more had moved to block his path.

They were grunting and hissing to each other. Barra looked from face to face, then looked over toward the well.

There were men over there, too, by the pile of stones. The old man who worked on the retaining walls of the village had picked up some of his building material.

He stood, eying Barra calculatingly, a stone poised in each hand.

THE END

IN TIMES TO COME

Next month's lead yarn is Mack Reynolds' "Ultima Thule." Nearly all of Man's colonial settling has been done by fanatics or rebels of one sort or another. Puritans, because they wanted freedom; criminals, because the home country wanted to be free of them; Conquistadores because they wanted adventure; gold-seekers who wanted quick wealth; but by far the greatest and most permanent population movements have been the "We want to do it *our* way!" people.

When the galaxy is opened by interstellar travel . . . guess who'll be founding colonies! Every crackpot, screwball, dissident and/or rebellious sect and splinter group will go roaring off into the wild starry spaces, to prove the wonderfulness of living *their* way.

And guess who'll be the most hated of all possible enemies?

The rebel-rouser (*not* the rable-rouser!) who seeks to change the wonderful new world. "Tommy Paine," the rebel-rouser . . . !

The Editor.

THE WEAKLING

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THE PLAGUE



By **TEDDY KELLER**

Suppose a strictly one hundred per cent American plague showed up . . . One that attacked only people within the political borders of the United States!

Illustrated by Schoenherr



ERGEANT Major Andrew McCloud ignored the jangling telephones and the excited jabber of a room full of brass, and lit a cigarette. Somebody had to keep his head in this mess. Everybody was about to flip.

Like the telephone. Two days ago Corporal Bettijeane Baker had been answering the rare call on the single line—in that friendly, husky voice that gave even generals pause—by saying, "Good morning. Office of the Civil Health and Germ Warfare Protection Co-ordinator." Now there was a switchboard out in the hall with a web of lines running to a dozen girls at a half dozen desks wedged into the outer office. And now the harried girls answered with a hasty, "Germ War Protection."

All the brass hats in Washington had suddenly discovered this office deep in the recesses of the Pentagon. And none of them could quite comprehend what had happened. The situation might have been funny, or at least pathetic, if it hadn't been so desperate. Even so, Andy McCloud's nerves and patience had frayed thin.

"I told you, general," he snapped to the flustered brigadier, "Colonel Patterson was retired ten days ago. I don't know what happened. Maybe this replacement sawbones got strangled in red tape. Anyhow, the brand-new lieutenant hasn't showed up here. As far as I know, I'm in charge."

"But this is incredible," a two-star general wailed. "A mysterious epidemic is sweeping the country, pos-

sibly an insidious germ attack timed to precede an all-out invasion, and a noncom is sitting on top of the whole powder keg."

Andy's big hands clenched into fists and he had to wait a moment before he could speak safely. Dog-gone the freckles and the unruly mop of hair that give him such a boyish look. "May I remind you, general," he said, "that I've been entombed here for two years. My staff and I know what to do. If you'll give us some cooperation and a priority, we'll try to figure this thing out."

"But good heavens," a chicken colonel moaned, "this is all so irregular. A noncom!" He said it like a dirty word.

"Irregular, hell," the brigadier snorted, the message getting through. "There're ways. Gentlemen, I suggest we clear out of here and let the sergeant get to work." He took a step toward the door, and the other officers, protesting and complaining, moved along after him. As they drifted out, he turned and said, "We'll clear your office for top priority." Then dead serious, he added, "Son, a whole nation could panic at any moment. You've got to come through."

Andy didn't waste time standing. He merely nodded to the general, snubbed out his cigarette and buzzed the intercom. "Bettijeane, will you bring me all the latest reports, please?" Then he peeled out of his be-ribboned blouse and rolled up his sleeves. He allowed himself one moment to enjoy the sight of the slim,

black-headed corporal who entered his office.

Bettijeau crossed briskly to his desk. She gave him a motherly smile as she put down a thick sheaf of papers. "You look beat," she said. "Brass give you much trouble?"

"Not much. We're top priority now." He ran fingers through the thick, brown hair and massaged his scalp, trying to generate stimulation to his weary and confused brain. "What's new?"

"I've gone through some of these," she said. "Tried to save you a little time."

"Thanks. Sit down."

She pulled up a chair and thumbed through the papers. "So far, no fatalities. That's why there's no panic yet, I guess. But it's spreading like . . . well, like a plague." Fear flickered deep in her dark eyes.

"Any water reports?" Andy asked.

"Wichita O.K., Indianapolis O.K., Tulsa O.K., Buffalo O.K.—and a bunch more. No indication there. Except"—she fished out a one-page report—"some little town in Tennessee. Yesterday there was a campaign for everybody to write their congressman about some deal and today they were to vote on a new water system. Hardly anybody showed up at the polls. They've all got it."

Andy shrugged. "You can drink the water, but don't vote for it. Oh, that's a big help." He rummaged through the clutter on his desk and came up with a crude chart. "Any trends yet?"

"It's hitting everybody," Bettijeau said helplessly. "Not many kids so far, thank heavens. But housewives, businessmen, office workers, teachers, preachers—rich, poor—from Florida to Alaska. Just when you called me in, one of the girls thought she had a trend. The isolated mountain areas of the West and South. But reports are too fragmentary."

"What is it?" he cried suddenly, banging the desk. "People deathly ill, but nobody dying. And doctors can't identify the poison until they have a fatality for an autopsy. People stricken in every part of the country, but the water systems are pure. How does it spread?"

"In food?"

"How? There must be hundreds of canneries and dairies and packing plants over the country. How could they all goof at the same time—even if it was sabotage?"

"On the wind?"

"But who could accurately predict every wind over the entire country—even Alaska and Hawaii—without hitting Canada or Mexico? And why wouldn't everybody get it in a given area?"

Bettijeau's smooth brow furrowed and she reached across the desk to grip his icy, sweating hands. "Andy, do . . . do you think it's . . . well, an enemy?"

"I don't know," he said. "I just don't know."

For a long moment he sat there, trying to draw strength from her, punishing his brain for the glimmer of an idea. Finally, shaking his head,

he pushed back into his chair and reached for the sheaf of papers.

"We've got to find a clue—a trend—an inkling of something." He nodded toward the outer office. "Stop all in-coming calls. Get those girls on lines to hospitals in every city and town in the country. Have them contact individual doctors in rural areas. Then line up another relief crew, and get somebody carting in more coffee and sandwiches. And on those calls, be sure we learn the sex, age and occupation of the victims. You and I'll start with Washington."

Bettjean snapped to her feet, grinned her encouragement and strode from the room. Andy could hear her crisp instructions to the girls on the phones. Sucking air through his teeth, he reached for his phone and directory.

He dialed until every finger of his right hand was sore. He spoke to worried doctors and frantic hospital administrators and hysterical nurses. His firm, fine penmanship deteriorated to a barely legible scrawl as writer's cramp knotted his hand and arm. His voice burned down to a rasping whisper. But columns climbed up his rough chart and broken lines pointed vaguely to trends.

It was hours later when Bettjean came back into the office with another stack of papers. Andy hung up his phone and reached for a cigarette. At that moment the door banged open. Nerves raw, Bettjean cried out. Andy's cigarette tumbled from trembling fingers.

"Sergeant," the chicken colonel barked, parading into the office.

Andy swore under his breath and eyed the two young officers who trailed after the colonel. Emotionally exhausted, he had to clamp his jaw against a huge laugh that struggled up in his throat. For just an instant there, the colonel had reminded him of a movie version of General Rommel strutting up and down before his tanks. But it wasn't a swagger stick the colonel had tucked under his arm. It was a folded newspaper. Opening it, the colonel flung it down on Andy's desk.

"RED PLAGUE SWEEPS NATION," the scare headline screamed. Andy's first glance caught such phrases as "alleged Russian plot" and "germ warfare" and "authorities hopelessly baffled."

Snatching the paper, Andy balled it and hurled it from him. "That'll help a lot," he growled hoarsely. "Well, then, sergeant." The colonel tried to relax his square face, but tension rode every weathered wrinkle and fear glinted behind the pale gray eyes. "So you finally recognize the gravity of the situation."

Andy's head snapped up, heated words searing toward his lips. Bettjean stepped quickly around the desk and laid a steady hand on his shoulder.

"Colonel," she said levelly, "you should know better than that."

A shocked young captain exploded, "Corporal. Maybe you'd better report to—"

"All right," Andy said sharply.

For a long moment he stared at his clenched fists. Then he exhaled slowly and, to the colonel, flatly and without apology, he said, "You'll have to excuse the people in this office if they overlook some of the G.I. niceties. We've been without sleep for two days, we're surviving on sandwiches and coffee, and we're fighting a war here that makes every other one look like a Sunday school picnic." He felt Bettijean's hand tighten reassuringly on his shoulder and he gave her a tired smile. Then he hunched forward and picked up a report. "So say what you came here to say and let us get back to work."

"Sergeant," the captain said, as if reading from a manual, "insubordination cannot be tolerated, even under emergency conditions. Your conduct here will be noted and—"

"Oh, good heavens!" Bettijean cried, her fingers biting into Andy's shoulder. "Do you have to come in here trying to throw your weight around when this man—"

"That's enough," the colonel snapped. "I had hoped that you two would co-operate, but . . ." He let the sentence trail off as he swelled up a bit with his own importance. "I have turned Washington upside down to get these two officers from the surgeon general's office. Sergeant. Corporal. You are relieved of your duties as of this moment. You will report to my office at once for suitable disciplinary action."

Bettijean sucked in a strained breath and her hand flew to her mouth. "But you can't—"

"Let's go," Andy said, pushing up from his chair. Ignoring the brass, he turned to her and brushed his lips across hers. "Let them sweat a while. Let 'em have the whole stinking business. Whatever they do to us, at least we can get some sleep."

"But you can't quit now," Bettijean protested. "These brass hats don't know from—"

"Corporal!" the colonel roared.

And from the door, an icy voice said, "Yes, colonel?"

The colonel and his captains wheeled, stared and saluted. "Oh, general," the colonel said. "I was just—"

"I know," the brigadier said, stepping into the room. "I've been listening to you. And I thought I suggested that everybody leave the sergeant and his staff alone."

"But, general, I—"

The general showed the colonel his back and motioned Andy into his chair. He glanced to Bettijean and a smile warmed his wedge face. "Corporal, were you speaking just then as a woman or as a soldier?"

Crimson erupted into Bettijean's face and her tight laugh said many things. She shrugged. "Both I guess."

The general waved her to a chair and, oblivious of the colonel, pulled up a chair for himself. The last trace of humor drained from his face as he leaned elbows on the desk. "Andy, this is even worse than we had feared."

Andy fumbled for a cigarette and

Bettijean passed him a match. A captain opened his mouth to speak, but the colonel shushed him.

"I've just come from Intelligence," the general said. "We haven't had a report—nothing from our agents, from the Diplomatic Corps, from the civilian newspapermen—not a word from any Iron Curtain country for a day and half. Everybody's frantic. The last item we had—it was a coded message the Reds'd tried to censor—was an indication of something big in the works."

"A day and a half ago," Andy mused. "Just about the time we knew we had an epidemic. And about the time they knew it."

"It could be just propaganda," Bettijean said hopefully, "proving that they could cripple us from within."

The general nodded. "Or it could be the softening up for an all-out effort. Every American base in the world is alerted and every serviceman is being issued live ammunition. If we're wrong, we've still got an epidemic and panic that could touch it off. If we're right . . . well, we've got to know. What can you do?"

Andy dropped his haggard face into his hands. His voice came through muffled. "I can sit here and cry." For an eternity he sat there, futility piling on helplessness, aware of Bettijean's hand on his arm. He heard the colonel try to speak and sensed the general's movement that silenced him.

Suddenly he sat upright and slapped a palm down on the desk.

"We'll find your answers, sir. All we ask is co-operation."

The general gave both Andy and Bettijean a long, sober look, then launched himself from the chair. Pivoting, he said, "Colonel, you and your captains will be stationed by that switchboard out there. For the duration of this emergency, you will take orders only from the sergeant and the corporal here."

"But, general," the colonel wailed, "a noncom? I'm assigned—"

The general snorted. "Insubordination cannot be tolerated—unless you find a two-star general to outrank me. Now, as I said before, let's get out of here and let these people work."

The brass exited wordlessly. Bettijean sighed noisily. Andy found his cigarette dead and lit another. He fancied a tiny lever in his brain and he shifted gears to direct his thinking back into the proper channel. Abruptly his fatigue began to lift. He picked up the new pile of reports Bettijean had brought in.

She moved around the desk and sat, noting the phone-book he had used, studying the names he had crossed off. "Did you learn anything?" she asked.

Andy coughed, trying to clear his raw throat. "It's crazy," he said. "From the Senate and House on down, I haven't found a single government worker sick."

"I found a few," she said. "Over in a Virginia hospital."

"But I did find," Andy said, flip-

ping through pages of his own scrawl, "a society matron and her social secretary, a whole flock of office workers—business, not government—and new parents and newly engaged girls and . . ." He shrugged.

"Did you notice anything significant about those office workers?"

Andy nodded. "I was going to ask you the same, since I was just guessing. I hadn't had time to check it out."

"Well, I checked some. Practically none of my victims came from big offices, either business or industry. They were all out of one- and two-girl offices or small businesses."

"That was my guess. And do you know that I didn't find a doctor, dentist or attorney?"

"Nor a single postal worker."

Andy tried to smile. "One thing we do know. It's not a communicable thing. Thank heaven for—"

He broke off as a cute blonde entered and put stacks of reports before both Andy and Bettjean. The girl hesitated, fidgeting, fingers to her teeth. Then, without speaking, she hurried out.

Andy stared at the top sheet and groaned. "This may be something. Half the adult population of Aspen, Colorado, is down."

"What?" Bettjean frowned over the report in her hands. "It's the same thing—only not quite as severe—in Taos and Santa Fe, New Mexico."

"Writers?"

"Mostly. Some artists, too, and musicians. And poets are among the hard hit."

"This is insane," Andy muttered. "Doctors and dentists are fine—writers and poets are sick. Make sense out of that."

Bettjean held up a paper and managed a confused smile. "Here's a country doctor in Tennessee. He doesn't even know what it's all about. Nobody's sick in his valley."

"Somebody in our outer office is organized," Andy said, pulling at his cigarette. "Here're reports from a dozen military installations all lumped together."

"What does it show?"

"Black-out. By order of somebody higher up—no medical releases. Must mean they've got it." He scratched the growing stubble on his chin. "If this were a fifth column setup, wouldn't the armed forces be the first hit?"

"Sure." Bettjean brightened, then sobered. "Maybe not. The brass could keep it secret if an epidemic hit an army camp. And they could slap a control condition on any military area. But the panic will come from the general public."

"Here's another batch," Andy said. "Small college towns under twenty-five thousand population. All hard hit."

"Well, it's not split intellectually. Small colleges and small offices and writers get it. Doctors don't and dentists don't. But we can't tell who's got it on the military bases."

"And it's not geographical. Look, remember those two reports from Tennessee? That place where they voted on water bonds or something,

everybody had it. But the country doctor in another section hadn't even heard of it." Andy could only shake his head.

Bettijeau heaved herself up from the chair and trudged back to the outer office. She returned momentarily with a tray of food. Putting a paper cup of coffee and a sandwich in front of Andy, she sat down and nibbled at her snack like an exhausted chipmunk.

Andy banged a fist at his desk again. Coffee splashed over the rim of his cup onto the clutter of papers. "It's here," he said angrily. "It's here somewhere, but we can't find it."

"The answer?"

"Of course. What is it that girls in small offices do or eat or drink or wear that girls in large offices don't do or eat or drink or wear? What do writers and doctors do differently? Or poets and dentists? What are we missing? What—"

In the outer office a girl cried out. A body thumped against a desk, then a chair, then to the floor. Two girls screamed.

Andy bolted up from his chair. Racing to the door, he shouted back to Bettijeau, "Get a staff doctor and a chemist from the lab."

It was the girl who had been so nervous in his office earlier. Now she lay in a pathetic little heap between her desk and chair, whimpering, shivering, eyes wide with horror. The other girls clustered at the hall door, plainly ready to stampede.

"It's not contagious," Andy

growled. "Find some blankets or coats to cover her. And get a glass of water."

The other girls, glad for the excuse, dashed away. Andy scooped up the fallen girl and put her down gently on the close-jammed desks. He used a chair cushion for a pillow. By then the other girls were back with a blanket and the glass of water. He covered the girl, gave her a sip of water and heard somebody murmur, "Poor Janis."

"Now," Andy said brightly, "how's that, Janis?"

She mustered a smile, and breathed, "Better. I . . . I was so scared. Fever and dizzy . . . symptoms like the epidemic."

"Now you know there's nothing to be afraid of," Andy said, feeling suddenly and ridiculously like a pill roller with a practiced bedside manner. "You know you may feel pretty miserable, but nobody's conked out with this stuff yet."

Janis breathed out and her taut body relaxed.

"Don't hurry," Andy said, "but I want you to tell me everything that you did—everything you ate or drank—in the last . . . oh, twelve hours." He felt a pressure behind him and swiveled his head to see Bettijeau standing there. He tried to smile.

"What time is it?" Janis asked weakly.

Andy glanced to a wall clock, then gave it a double take.

One of the girls said, "It's three o'clock in the morning." She edged nearer Andy, obviously eager to re-

place Janis as the center of attention. Andy ignored her.

"I . . . I've been here since . . . golly, yesterday morning at nine," Janis said. "I came to work as usual and . . ."

Slowly, haltingly, she recited the routine of a routine work day, then told about the quick snack that sufficed for supper and about staying on her phone and typewriter for another five hours. "It was about eleven when the relief crew came in."

"What did you do then?" Andy asked.

"I . . . I took a break and . . ." Her ivory skin reddened, the color spreading into the roots of her fluffy curls, and she turned her face away from Andy. "And I had a sandwich and some coffee and got a little nap in the ladies' lounge and . . . and that's all."

"And that's not all," Andy prompted. "What else?"

"Nothing," Janis said too quickly.

Andy shook his head. "Tell it all and maybe it'll help."

"But . . . but . . ."

"Was it something against regulations?"

"I . . . I don't know. I think . . ."

"I'll vouch for your job in this office."

"Well . . ." She seemed on the verge of tears and her pleading glance sought out Andy, then Bettjean, then her co-workers. Finally, resigned, she said, "I . . . I wrote a letter to my mother."

Andy swallowed against his groan of disappointment. "And you told

her about what we were doing here."

Janis nodded, and tears welled into her wide eyes.

"Did you mail it?"

"Y . . . yes."

"You didn't use a government envelope to save a stamp?"

"Oh, no: I always carry a few stamps with me." She choked down a sob. "Did I do wrong?"

"No, I don't think so," Andy said, patting her shoulder. "There's certainly nothing secret about this epidemic. Now you just take it easy and— Oh, here's a doctor now."

The doctor, a white-headed Air Force major, bustled into the room. A lab technician in a white smock was close behind. Andy could only shrug and indicate the girl.

Turning away, lighting a cigarette, he tried to focus on the tangle of thoughts that spun through his head. Doctors, writers, society matrons, office workers—Aspen, Taos and college towns—thousands of people sick—but none in that valley in Tennessee—and few government workers—just one girl in his office—and she was sicker and more frightened about a letter—and . . .

"Hey, wait!" Andy yelled.

Everyone in the room froze as Andy spun around, dashed to Bettjean's desk and yanked out the wide, top drawer. He pawed through it, straightened, then leaped across to the desk Janis had used. He snatched open drawer after drawer. In a bottom one he found her purse. Ripping it open, he dumped the contents on the desk and clawed through the

pile until he found what he wanted. Handing it to the lab technician, he said, "Get me a report. Fast."

The technician darted out.

Andy wheeled to Bettjean. "Get the brass in here. And call the general first." To the doctor, he said, "Give that girl the best of everything."

Then he ducked back to his own office and to the pile of reports. He was still poring over them when the general arrived. Half a dozen other brass hats, none of whom had been to bed, were close behind. The lab technician arrived a minute later. He shook his head as he handed his hastily scribbled report to Andy.

It was Bettjean who squeezed into the office and broke the brittle silence. "Andy, for heaven's sake, what is it?" Then she moved around the desk to stand behind him as he faced the officers.

"Have you got something?" the brigadier asked. "Some girl outside was babbling about writers and doctors, and dentists and college students, and little secretaries and big secretaries. Have you established a trend?"

Andy glanced at the lab report and his smile was as relieved as it was weary. "Our problem," he said, "was in figuring out what a writer does that a doctor doesn't—why girls from small offices were sick—and why senators and postal workers weren't—why college students caught the bug and people in a Tennessee community didn't.

"The lab report isn't complete. They haven't had time to isolate the poison and prescribe medication. But"—he held up a four-cent stamp—"here's the villain, gentlemen."

The big brass stood stunned and shocked. Mouths flapped open and eyes bugged at Andy, at the stamp.

Bettjean said, "Sure. College kids and engaged girls and new parents and especially writers and artists and poets—they'd all lick lots of stamps. Professional men have secretaries. Big offices have postage-meter machines. And government offices have free franking. And"—she threw her arms around the sergeant's neck—"Andy, you're wonderful."

"The old American ingenuity," the colonel said, reaching for Andy's phone. "I knew we could lick it. Now all we have to do—"

"At ease, colonel," the brigadier said sharply. He waited until the colonel had retreated, then addressed Andy. "It's your show. What do you suggest?"

"Get somebody—maybe even the President—on all radio and TV networks. Explain frankly about the four-centers and warn against licking *any* stamps. Then—"

He broke off as his phone rang. Answering, he listened for a moment, then hung up and said, "But before the big announcement, get somebody checking on the security clearances at whatever plant it is where they print stamps. This's a big deal. Somebody may've been planted years ago for this operation. It shouldn't be too hard.

"But there's no evidence it was a plot yet. Could be sure accident—some chemical in the stickum spoiled. Do they keep the stickum in barrels? Find out who had access. And . . . oh, the phone call. That was the lab. The antidote's simple and the cure should be quick. They can phone or broadcast the medical information to doctors. The man on the phone said they could start emptying hospitals in six hours. And maybe we should release some propaganda. 'United States whips mystery virus,' or something like that. And we could send the Kremlin a stamp collection and . . . Aw, you take it, sir. I'm pooped."

The general wheeled to fire a salvo of commands. Officers poured into the corridor. Only the brigadier remained, a puzzled frown crinkling his granite brow.

"But you said that postal workers weren't getting sick."

Andy chuckled. "That's right. Did

you ever see a post office clerk lick a stamp? They always use a sponge."

The general looked to Bettjean, to Andy, to the stamp. He grinned and the grin became a rumbling laugh. "How would you two like a thirty-day furlough to rest up—or to get better acquainted?"

Bettjean squealed. Andy reached for her hand.

"And while you're gone," the general continued, "I'll see what strings I can pull. If I can't wangle you a couple of battlefield commissions, I'll zip you both through O.C.S. so fast you won't even have time to pin on the bars."

But neither Andy nor Bettjean had heard a word after the mention of furlough. Like a pair of puppy-lovers, they were sinking into the depths of each other's eyes.

And the general was still chuckling as he picked up the lone four-cent stamp in his left hand, made a gun of his right hand, and marched the stamp out of the office under guard.

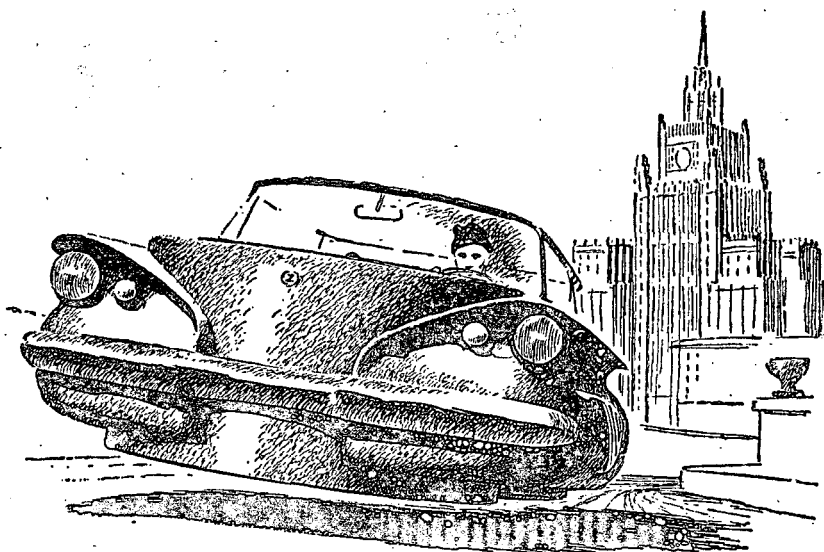
THE END

The Analytical Laboratory

I've gotten several letters asking how the An Lab scores are made up—so I gather it's time to run the explanation for the readers who've joined since we last explained.

Readers vote for their preferences, listing the stories in 1, 2, 3, . . . order. This month, "Occasion for Disaster" was voted first by some, and fifth by others—it got some votes listing it in every possible position. So, in fact, did every other story; there wasn't any story that didn't get both a first and a fifth place vote.

(Continued on page 81)



FREEDOM

By MACK REYNOLDS

Illustrated by Schoenherr

Freedom is a very dangerous thing indeed. It is so catching—like a plague—even the doctors get it.



OLONEL Ilya Simonov tooled his Zil air-cushion convertible along the edge of Red Square, turned right immediately beyond St. Basil's Cathedral, crossed the Moscow River by the Moskvoretski Bridge and debouched into the heavy, largely automated

traffic of Pyatniskaya. At Dobryninskaya Square he turned west to Gorki Park which he paralleled on Kaluga until he reached the old baroque palace which housed the Ministry.

There were no flags, no signs, nothing to indicate the present nature of the aged Czarist building.

He left the car at the curb, slam-

ming its door behind him and walking briskly to the entrance. Hard, handsome in the Slavic tradition, dedicated, Ilya Simonov was young for his rank. A plainclothes man, idling a hundred feet down the street, eyed him briefly then turned his attention elsewhere. The two guards at the gate snapped to attention, their eyes straight ahead. Colonel Simonov was in mufti and didn't answer the salute.

The inside of the old building was well known to him. He went along marble halls which contained antique statuary and other relics of the past which, for unknown reason, no one had ever bothered to remove. At the heavy door which entered upon the office of his destination he came to a halt and spoke briefly to the lieutenant at the desk there.

"The Minister is expecting me," Simonov clipped.

The lieutenant did the things receptionists do everywhere and looked up in a moment to say, "Go right in, Colonel Simonov."

Minister Kliment Blagonravov looked up from his desk at Simonov's entrance. He was a heavy-set man, heavy of face and he still affected the shaven head, now rapidly disappearing among upper-echelons of the Party. His jacket had been thrown over the back of a chair and his collar loosened; even so there was a sheen of sweat on his face.

He looked up at his most trusted field man, said in the way of greeting, "Ilya," and twisted in his swivel chair to a portable bar. He swung

open the door of the small refrigerator and emerged with a bottle of Stolitschnaja vodka. He plucked two three-ounce glasses from a shelf and pulled the bottle's cork with his teeth. "Sit down, sit down, Ilya," he grunted as he filled the glasses. "How was Magnitogorsk?"

Ilya Simonov secured his glass before seating himself in one of the room's heavy leathern chairs. He sighed, relaxed, and said, "Terrible. I loath those ultra-industrialized cities. I wonder if the Americans do any better with Pittsburgh or the British with Birmingham."

"I know what you mean," the security head rumbled. "How did you make out with your assignment, Ilya?"

Colonel Simonov frowned down into the colorlessness of the vodka before dashing it back over his palate. "It's all in my report, Kliment." He was the only man in the organization who called Blagonravov by his first name.

His chief grunted again and reached forward to refill the glass. "I'm sure it is. Do you know how many reports go across this desk daily? And did you know that Ilya Simonov is the most long-winded, as the Americans say, of my some two hundred first-line operatives?"

The colonel shifted in his chair. "Sorry," he said. "I'll keep that in mind."

His chief rumbled his sour version of a chuckle. "Nothing, nothing, Ilya. I was jesting. However, give me a brief of your mission."

Ilya Simonov frowned again at his

refilled vodka glass but didn't take it up for a moment. "A routine matter," he said. "A dozen or so engineers and technicians, two or three fairly high-ranking scientists, and three or four of the local intelligentsia had formed some sort of informal club. They were discussing national and international affairs."

Kliment Blagonravov's thin eyebrows went up but he waited for the other to go on.

Ilya said impatiently, "It was the ordinary. They featured complete freedom of opinion and expression in their weekly get-togethers. They began by criticizing without extremism, local affairs, matters concerned with their duties, that sort of thing. In the beginning, they even sent a few letters of protest to the local press, signing the name of the club. After their ideas went further out, they didn't dare do that, of course."

He took up his second drink and belted in back, not wanting to give it time to lose its chill.

His chief filled in. "And they delved further and further into matters that should be discussed only within the party—if even there—until they arrived at what point?"

Colonel Simonov shrugged. "Until they finally got to the point of discussing how best to overthrow the Soviet State and what socio-economic system should follow it. The usual thing. I've run into possibly two dozen such outfits in the past five years."

His chief grunted and tossed back his own drink. "My dear Ilya," he rumbled sourly, "I've *run into*, as you

say, more than two hundred."

Simonov was taken back by the figure but he only looked at the other.

Blagonravov said, "What did you do about it?"

"Several of them were popular locally. In view of Comrade Zverev's recent pronouncements of increased freedom of press and speech, I thought it best not to make a public display. Instead, I took measures to charge individual members with inefficiency in their work, with corruption or graft, or with other crimes having nothing to do with the reality of the situation. Six or seven in all were imprisoned, others demoted. Ten or twelve I had switched to other cities, principally into more backward areas in the virgin lands."

"And the ringleaders?" the security head asked.

"There were two of them, one a research chemist of some prominence, the other a steel plant manager. They were both, ah, unfortunately killed in an automobile accident while under the influence of drink."

"I see," Blagonravov nodded. "So actually the whole rat's nest was stamped out without attention being brought to it so far as the Magnitogorsk public is concerned." He nodded heavily again. "You can almost always be depended upon to do the right thing, Ilya. If you weren't so confoundedly good a field man, I'd make you my deputy."

Which was exactly what Simonov would have hated, but he said nothing.

"One thing," his chief said. "The

origin of this, ah, *club* which turned into a tiny underground all of its own. Did you detect the finger of the West, stirring up trouble?"

"No." Simonov shook his head. "If such was the case, the agents involved were more clever than I'd ordinarily give either America or Common Europe credit for. I could be wrong, of course."

"Perhaps," the police head growled. He eyed the bottle before him but made no motion toward it. He wiped the palm of his right hand back over his bald pate, in unconscious irritation. "But there is something at work that we are not getting at." Blagonravov seemed to change subjects. "You speak Czech, so I understand."

"That's right. My mother was from Bratislava. My father met her there during the Hitler war."

"And you know Czechoslovakia?"

"I've spent several vacations in the Tatras at such resorts as Tatranská Lomnica since the country's been made such a tourist center of the satellites." Ilya Simonov didn't understand this trend of the conversation.

"You have some knowledge of automobiles, too?"

Simonov shrugged. "I've driven all my life."

His chief rumbled thoughtfully, "Time isn't of essence. You can take a quick course at the Moskvich plant. A week or two would give you all the background you need."

Ilya laughed easily. "I seem to have missed something. Have my

shortcomings caught up with me? Am I to be demoted to automobile mechanic?"

Kliment Blagonravov became definite. "You are being given the most important assignment of your career, Ilya. This rot, this ever growing ferment against the Party, must be cut out, liquidated. It seems to fester worst among the middle echelons of . . . what did that Yugoslavian Djilas call us? . . . the *New Class*. Why? That's what we must know."

He sat farther back in his chair and his heavy lips made a *moue*. "Why, Ilya?" he repeated. "After more than half a century the Party has attained all its goals. Lenin's millennium is here; the end for which Stalin purged ten millions and more, is reached; the sacrifices demanded by Khrushchev in the Seven-Year Plans have finally paid off, as the Yankees say. Our gross national product, our per capita production, our standard of living, is the highest in the world. Sacrifices are no longer necessary."

There had been an almost whining note in his voice. But now he broke it off. He poured them still another drink. "At any rate, Ilya, I was with Frol Zverev this morning. Number One is incensed. It seems that in the Azerbaijan Republic, for one example, that even the Komso-mols were circulating among themselves various proscribed books and pamphlets. Comrade Zverev instructed me to concentrate on discovering the reason for this disease."

Colonel Simonov scowled. "What's

this got to do with Czechoslovakia—and automobiles?"

The security head waggled a fat finger at him. "What we've been doing, thus far, is dashing forth upon hearing of a new conflagration and stamping it out. Obviously, that's no answer. We must find who is behind it. How it begins. Why it begins. That's your job?"

"Why Czechoslovakia?"

"You're unknown as a security agent there, for one thing. You will go to Prague and become manager of the Moskvich automobile distribution agency. No one, not even the Czech unit of our ministry will be aware of your identity. You will play it by ear, as the Americans say."

"To whom do I report?"

"Only to me, until the task is completed. When it is, you will return to Moscow and report fully." A grimace twisted Blagonravov's face. "If I am still here. Number One is truly incensed, Ilya."

There had been some more. Kliment Blagonravov had evidently chosen Prague, the capital of Czechoslovakia, as the seat of operations in a suspicion that the wave of unrest spreading insidiously throughout the Soviet Complex owed its origins to the West. Thus far, there had been no evidence of this but the suspicion refused to die. If not the West, then who? The Cold War was long over but the battle for men's minds continued even in peace.

Ideally, Ilya Simonov was to infiltrate whatever Czech groups might

be active in the illicit movement and then, if he discovered there was a higher organization, a center of the movement, he was to attempt to become a part of it. If possible he was to rise in the organization to as high a point as he could.

Blagonravov, Minister of the *Cbrezvychainaya Komissiya*, the Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution and Sabotage, was of the opinion that if this virus of revolt was originating from the West, then it would be stronger in the satellite countries than in Russia itself. Simonov held no opinion as yet. He would wait to see. However, there was an uncomfortable feeling about the whole assignment. The group in Magnitogorsk, he was all but sure, had no connections with Western agents, nor anyone else, for that matter. Of course, it might have been an exception.

He left the Ministry, his face thoughtful as he climbed into his waiting Zil. This assignment was going to be a lengthy one. He'd have to wind up various affairs here in Moscow, personal as well as business. He might be away for a year or more.

There was a sheet of paper on the seat of his aircushion car. He frowned at it. It couldn't have been there before. He picked it up.

It was a mimeographed throw-away.

It was entitled, *FREEDOM*, and it began: *Comrades, more than a hundred years ago the founders of scientific socialism, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, explained that the State*

was incompatible with liberty, that the State was an instrument of repression of one class by another. They explained that for true freedom ever to exist the State must wither away.

Under the leadership of Lenin, Stalin, Khrushchev and now Zverev, the State has become ever stronger. Far from withering away, it continues to oppress us. Fellow Russians, it is time we take action! We must . . .

Colonel Simonov bounced from his car again, shot his eyes up and down the street. He barely refrained from drawing the 9 mm automatic which nestled under his left shoulder and which he knew how to use so well.

He curtly beckoned to the plainclothes man, still idling against the building a hundred feet or so up the street. The other approached him, touched the brim of his hat in a half salute.

Simonov snapped, "Do you know who I am?"

"Yes, colonel."

Ilya Simonov thrust the leaflet forward. "How did this get into my car?"

The other looked at it blankly. "I don't know, Colonel Simonov."

"You've been here all this time?"

"Why, yes colonel."

"With my car in plain sight?"

That didn't seem to call for an answer. The plainclothesman looked apprehensive but blank.

Simonov turned on his heel and approached the two guards at the gate. They were not more than thirty feet from where he was parked.

They came to the salute but he growled, "At ease. Look here, did anyone approach my vehicle while I was inside?"

One of the soldiers said, "Sir, twenty or thirty people have passed since the Comrade colonel entered the Ministry."

The other one said, "Yes, sir."

Ilya Simonov looked from the guards to the plainclothes man and back, in frustration. Finally he spun on his heel again and re-entered the car. He slapped the elevation lever, twisted the wheel sharply, hit the jets pedal with his foot and shot into the traffic.

The plainclothes man looked after him and muttered to the guards, "Blagonrayov's hatchetman. He's killed more men than the plague. A bad one to have down on you."

Simonov bowled down Kaluga at excessive speed. "Driving like a young *stilyagi*," he growled in irritation at himself. But, confound it, how far had things gone when subversive leaflets were placed in cars parked in front of the ministry devoted to combating counter-revolution.

He'd been away from Moscow for over a month and the amenities in the smog, smoke and coke fumes blanketing industrial complex of Magnitogorsk hadn't been particularly of the best. Ilya Simonov headed now for Gorki Street and the Baku Restaurant. He had an idea that it was going to be some time before the opportunity would be repeated for him to sit down to Za-

kouski, the salty, spicy Russian hors d'oeuvres, and to Siberian pilmeny and a bottle of Tsinandali.

The restaurant, as usual, was packed. In irritation, Ilya Simonov stood for a while waiting for a table, then, taking the head waiter's advice, agreed to share one with a stranger.

The stranger, a bearded little man, who was dwaddling over his Gurievskaya kasha dessert while reading *Izvestia*, glanced up at him, unseemingly, bobbed his head at Simonov's request to share his table, and returned to the newspaper.

The harried waiter took his time in turning up with a menu. Ilya Simonov attempted to relax. He had no particular reason to be upset by the leaflet found in his car. Obviously, whoever had thrown it there was distributing haphazardly. The fact that it was mimeographed, rather than printed, was an indication of lack of resources, an amateur affair. But what in the world did these people want? What did they *want*?

The Soviet State was turning out consumer's goods, homes, cars as no nation in the world. Vacations were lengthy, working hours short. A four-day week, even! What did they *want*? What motivates a man who is living on a scale unknown to a Czarist boyar to risk his position, even his life! in a stupidly impossible revolt against the country's government?

The man across from him snorted in contempt.

He looked over the top of his paper at Simonov and said, "The elec-

tion in Italy. Ridiculous!"

Ilya Simonov brought his mind back to the present. "How did they turn out? I understand the depression is terrible there."

"So I understand," the other said. "The vote turned out as was to be expected."

Simonov's eyebrows went up. "The Party has been voted into power?"

"Ha!" the other snorted. "The vote for the Party has fallen off by more than a third."

The security colonel scowled at him. "That doesn't sound reasonable, if the economic situation is as bad as has been reported."

His table mate put down the paper. "Why not? Has there ever been a country where the Party was *voted* into power? Anywhere—at any time during the more than half a century since the Bolsheviks first took over here in Russia?"

Simonov looked at him.

The other was talking out opinions he'd evidently formed while reading the *Izvestia* account of the Italian elections, not paying particular attention to the stranger across from him.

He said, his voice irritated, "Nor will there ever be. They know better. In the early days of the revolution the workers might have had illusions about the Party and its goals. Now they've lost them. Everywhere, they've lost them."

Ilya Simonov said tightly, "How do you mean?"

"I mean the Party has been re-

jected. With the exception of China and Yugoslavia, both of whom have their own varieties, the only countries that have adopted our system have done it under pressure from outside—not by their own efforts. Not by the will of the majority.”

Colonel Simonov said flatly, “You seem to think that Marxism will never dominate the world.”

“Marxism!” the other snorted. “If Marx were alive in Russia today, Frol Zverev would have him in a Siberian labor camp within twenty-four hours.”

Ilya Simonov brought forth his wallet and opened it to his police credentials. He said coldly, “Let me see your identification papers. You are under arrest.”

The other stared at him for a moment, then snorted his contempt. He brought forth his own wallet and handed it across the table.

Simonov flicked it open, his face hard. He looked at the man. “Konstantin Kasatkin.”

“Candidate member of the Academy of Sciences,” the other snapped. “And bearer of the Hero of the Soviet Union award.”

Simonov flung the wallet back to him in anger. “And as such, practically immune.”

The other grinned nastily at him. “Scientists, my police friend, cannot be bothered with politics. Where would the Soviet Complex be if you took to throwing biologists such as myself into prison for making unguarded statements in an absent-minded moment?”

Simonov slapped a palm down on the table. “Confound it, Comrade,” he snapped, “how is the Party to maintain discipline in the country if high ranking persons such as yourself speak open subversion to strangers.”

The other snorted his contempt. “Perhaps there’s too much discipline in Russia, Comrade policeman.”

“Rather, far from enough,” Simonov snapped back.

The waiter, at last, approached and extended a menu to the security officer. But Ilya Simonov had come to his feet. “Never mind,” he clipped in disgust. “There is an air of degenerate decay about here.”

The waiter stared at him. The biologist snorted and returned to his paper. Simonov turned and stormed out. He could find something to eat and drink in his own apartment.

The old, old town of Prague, the *Golden City of a Hundred Spires* was as always the beautifully stolid medieval metropolis which even a quarter of a century and more of Party rule could not change. The Old Town, nestled in a bend of the Vltava River, as no other city in Europe, breathed its centuries, its air of yesteryear.

Colonel Ilya Simonov, in spite of his profession, was not immune to beauty. He deliberately failed to notify his new office of his arrival, flew in on a Ceskoslovenské Aerolinie Tupolev rocket liner and spent his first night at the Alcron Hotel just off Wenceslas Square. He knew that as the new manager of the local Moskvich distribution agency he’d

have fairly elaborate quarters, probably in a good section of town, but this first night he wanted to himself.

He spent it wandering quietly in the old quarter, dropping in to the age-old beer halls for a half liter of Pilsen Urquell here, a foaming stein of Smichov Lager there. Czech beer, he was reminded all over again, is the best in the world. No argument, no debate, the best in the world.

He ate in the endless automated cafeterias that line Václavské Ná-
m-
e-
s-
í the entertainment center of Prague. Ate an open sandwich here, some crabmeat salad there, a sausage and another glass of Pilsen some-

where else again. He was getting the feel of the town and of its people. Of recent years, some of the tension had gone out of the atmosphere in Moscow and the other Soviet centers; with the coming of economic prosperity there had also come a relaxation. The *fear*, so heavy in the Stalin era, had fallen off in that of Khrushchev and still more so in the present reign of Frol Zverev. In fact, Ilya Simonov was not alone in Party circles in wondering whether or not discipline had been allowed to slip too far. It is easier, the old Russian proverb goes, to hang onto the reins than to regain them once dropped.



But if Moscow had lost much of its pall of fear, Prague had certainly gone even further. In fact, in the U-Pinkasu beer hall Simonov had idly picked up a magazine left by some earlier wassailer. It was a light literary publication devoted almost exclusively to humor. There were various cartoons, some of them touching political subjects. Ilya Simonov had been shocked to see a caricature of Frol Zverev himself. Zverev, Number One! Ridiculed in a second-rate magazine in a satellite country!

Ilya Simonov made a note of the name and address of the magazine and the issue.

Across the heavy wooden community table from him, a beer drinker grinned, in typically friendly Czech style. "A good magazine," he said. "You should subscribe."

A waiter, bearing an even dozen liter-size steins of beer hurried along; spotted the fact that Simonov's mug was empty, slipped a full one into its place, gave the police agent's saucer a quick mark of a pencil, and hurried on again. In the U Pinkasu, it was supposed that you wanted another beer so long as you remained sitting. When you finally staggered to your feet, the nearest waiter counted the number of pencil marks on your saucer and you paid up.

Ilya Simonov said cautiously to his neighbor, "Seems to be quite, ah, brash." He tapped the magazine with a finger.

The other shrugged and grinned again. "Things loosen up as the years go by," he said. "What a man would-

n't have dared say to his own wife, five years ago, they have on TV today."

"I'm surprised the police don't take steps," Simonov said, trying to keep his voice expressionless.

The other took a deep swallow of his Pilsen Urquell. He pursed his lips and thought about it. "You know, I wonder if they'd dare. Such a case brought into the People's Courts might lead to all sort of public reaction these days."

It had been some years since Ilya Simonov had been in Prague and even then he'd only gone through on the way to the ski resorts in the mountains. He was shocked to find the Czech state's control had fallen off to this extent. Why, here he was, a complete stranger, being openly talked to on political subjects.

His cross-the-table neighbor shook his head, obviously pleased. "If you think Prague is good, you ought to see Warsaw. It's as free as Paris! I saw a Tri-D cinema up there about two months ago. You know what it was about? The purges in Moscow back in the 1930s."

"A rather unique subject," Simonov said.

"Um-m-m, made a very strong case for Bukharin, in particular."

Simonov said, very slowly, "I don't understand. You mean this . . . this film supported the, ah, Old Bolsheviks?"

"Of course. Why not? Everybody knows they weren't guilty." The Czech snorted deprecation. "At least not guilty of what they were charged

with. They were in Stalin's way and he liquidated them." The Czech thought about it for a while. "I wonder if he was already insane, that far back."

Had he taken up his mug of beer and dashed it into Simonov's face, he couldn't have surprised the Russian more.

Ilya Simonov had to take control of himself. His first instinct was to show his credentials, arrest the man and have him hauled up before the local agency of Simonov's ministry.

But obviously that was out of the question. He was in Czechoslovakia and, although Moscow still dominated the Soviet Complex, there was local autonomy and the Czech police just didn't enjoy their affairs being meddled with unless in extreme urgency.

Besides, this man was obviously only one among many. A stranger in a beer hall. Ilya Simonov suspected that if he continued his wanderings about the town, he'd meet in the process of only one evening a score of persons who would talk the same way.

Besides, still again, he was here in Prague incognito, his job to trace the sources of this dry rot, not to run down individual Czechs.

But the cinema, and TV! Surely anti-Party sentiment hadn't been allowed to go this far!

He got up from the table shakily, paid up for his beer and forced himself to nod good-by in friendly fashion to the subversive Czech he'd been talking to.

In the morning he strolled over to the offices of the Moskvich Agency which was located only a few blocks from his hotel on Celetna Hybernaska. The Russian car agency, he knew, was having a fairly hard go of it in Prague and elsewhere in Czechoslovakia. The Czechs, long before the Party took over in 1948, had been a highly industrialized, modern nation. They consequently had their own automobile works, such as Skoda, and their models were locally more popular than the Russian Moskvich, Zim and Pobeda.

Theoretically, the reason Ilya Simonov was the newly appointed agency head was to push Moskvich sales among the Czechs. He thought, half humorously, half sourly, to himself, even under the Party we have competition and pressure for higher sales. What was it that some American economist had called them? a system of State-Capitalism.

At the Moskvich offices he found himself in command of a staff that consisted of three fellow Russians, and a dozen or so Czech assistants. His immediate subordinate was a Catherine Panova, whose dossier revealed her to be a party member, though evidently not a particularly active one, at least not since she'd been assigned here in Prague.

She was somewhere in her mid-twenties, a graduate of the University of Moscow, and although she'd been in the Czech capital only a matter of six months or so, had already adapted to the more fashionable dress that the style-conscious women of this

former Western capital went in for. Besides that, Catherina Panova managed to be one of the downright prettiest girls Ilya Simonov had ever seen.

His career had largely kept him from serious involvement in the past. Certainly the dedicated women you usually found in Party ranks seldom were of the type that inspired you to romance but he wondered now, looking at this new assistant of his, if he hadn't let too much of his youth go by without more investigation into the usually favorite pastime of youth.

He wondered also, but only briefly, if he should reveal his actual identity to her. She was, after all, a party member. But then he checked himself. Kliment Blagonravov had stressed the necessity of complete secrecy. Not even the local offices of the ministry were to be acquainted with his presence.

He let Catherina introduce him around, familiarize him with the local methods of going about their business affairs and the problems they were running into.

She ran a hand back over her forehead, placing a wisp of errant hair, and said, "I suppose, as an expert from Moscow, you'll be installing a whole set of new methods."

It was far from his intention to spend much time at office work. He said, "Not at all. There is no hurry. For a time, we'll continue your present policies, just to get the feel of the situation. Then perhaps in a few months, we'll come up with some ideas."

She obviously liked his use of

"we" rather than "I." Evidently, the staff had been a bit nervous upon his appointment as new manager. He already felt, vaguely, that the three Russians here had no desire to return to their homeland. Evidently, there was something about Czechoslovakia that appealed to them all. The fact irritated him but somehow didn't surprise.

Catherina said, "As a matter of fact. I have some opinions on possible changes myself. Perhaps if you'll have dinner with me tonight, we can discuss them informally."

Ilya Simonov was only mildly surprised at her suggesting a rendezvous with him. Party members were expected to ignore sex and be on an equal footing. She was as free to suggest a dinner date to him, as he was to her. Of course, she wasn't speaking as a Party member now. In fact, he hadn't even revealed to her his own membership.

As it worked out, they never got around to discussing distribution of the new Moskvich aircushion jet car. They became far too busy enjoying food, drink, dancing—and each other.

They ate at the Budapest, in the Prava Hotel, complete with Hungarian dishes and Riesling, and they danced to the inevitable gypsy music. It occurred to Ilya Simonov that there was a certain pleasure to be derived from the fact that your feminine companion was the most beautiful woman in the establishment and one of the most attractively dressed. There was a certain lift to be en-

joyed when you realized that the eyes of half the other males present were following you in envy.

One thing led to another. He insisted on introducing her to barack, the Hungarian national spirit, in the way of a digestive. The apricot brandy, distilled to the point of losing all sweetness and fruit flavor, required learning. It must be tossed back just so. By the time Catherina had the knack, neither of them were feeling strain. In fact, it became obviously necessary for him to be given a guided tour of Prague's night spots.

It turned out that Prague offered considerably more than Moscow, which even with the new relaxation was still one of the most staid cities in the Soviet Complex.

They took in the vaudeville at the Alhambra, and the variety at the Pražské Varieté.

They took in the show at the U Sv Tomáše, the age old tavern which had been making its own smoked black beer since the fifteenth century. And here Catherina with the assistance of revelers from neighboring tables taught him the correct pronunciation of *Na zdraví!* the Czech toast. It seemed required to go from heavy planked table to table practicing the new salutation to the accompaniment of the pungent borovika gin.

Somehow in here they saw the Joseph Skupa puppets, and at this stage Ilya Simonov found only great amusement at the political innuendoes involved in half the skits. It would never had one in Moscow or Lenin-

grad, of course, but here it was very amusing indeed. There was even a caricature of a security police minister who could only have been his superior Kliment Blagonravov.

They wound up finally at the U Kalicha, made famous by Hasek in "The Good Soldier Schweik." In fact various illustrations from the original classic were framed on the walls.

They had been laughing over their early morning snack, now Ilya Simonov looked at her approvingly. "See here," he said. "We must do this again."

"Fine," she laughed.

"In fact, tomorrow," he insisted. He looked at his watch. "I mean to-night."

She laughed at him. "Our great expert from Moscow. Far from improving our operations, there'll be less accomplished than ever if you make a nightly practice of carrying on like we did this evening."

He laughed too. "But tonight," he said insistently.

She shook her head. "Sorry, but I'm already booked up for this evening."

He scowled for the first time in hours. He'd seemingly forgotten that he hardly knew this girl. What her personal life was, he had no idea. For that matter, she might be engaged or even married. The very idea irritated him.

He said stiffly, "Ah, you have a date?"

Catherina laughed again. "My, what a dark face. If I didn't know you to be an automobile distributor expert, I would suspect you of being a

security police agent." She shook her head. "Not a date. If by that you mean another man. There is a meeting that I would like to attend."

"A meeting! It sounds dry as—"

She was shaking her head. "Oh, no. A group I belong to. Very interesting. We're to be addressed by an American journalist."

Suddenly he was all but sober.

He tried to smooth over the short space of silence his surprise had precipitated. "An American journalist? Under government auspices?"

"Hardly." She smiled at him over her glass of Pilsen. "I forget," she said. "If you're from Moscow, you probably aren't aware of how open things are here in Prague. A whiff of fresh air."

"I don't understand. Is this group of yours, ah, illegal?"

She shrugged impatiently. "Oh, of course not. Don't be silly. We gather to hear various speakers, to discuss world affairs. That sort of thing. Oh, of course, *theoretically* it's illegal, but for that matter even the head of the Skoda plant attended last week. It's only for more advanced intellectuals, of course. Very advanced. But, for that matter, I know a dozen or so Party members, both Czech and Russian, who attend."

"But an American journalist? What's he doing in the country? Is he accredited?"

"No, no. You misunderstand. He entered as a tourist, came across some Prague newspapermen and as an upshot he's to give a talk on freedom of the press."

"I see," Simonov said.

She was impatient with him. "You don't understand at all. See here, why don't you come along tonight? I'm sure I can get you in."

"It sounds like a good idea," Ilya Simonov said. He was completely sober now.

He made a written report to Kliment Blagonravov before turning in. He mentioned the rather free discussion of matters political in the Czech capital, using the man he'd met in the beer hall as an example. He reported—although, undoubtedly, Blagonravov would already have the information—hearing of a Polish Tri-D film which had defended the Old Bolsheviks purged in the 1930s. He mentioned the literary magazine, with its caricature of Frol Zverev, and, last of all, and then after hesitation, he reported party member Catherine Panova, who evidently belonged to a group of intellectuals who were not above listening to a talk given by a foreign journalist who was not speaking under the auspices of the Czech Party nor the government.

At the office, later, Catherine grinned at him and made a face. She ticked it off on her fingers. "Riesling, barack, smoked black beer, and borovica gin—we should have known better."

He went along with her, putting one hand to his forehead. "We should have stuck to vodka."

"Well," she said, "tonight we can be virtuous. An intellectual evening, rather than a carouse."

Actually, she didn't look at all the worse for wear. Evidently, Catherina Panova was still young enough that she could pub crawl all night, and still look fresh and alert in the morning. His own mouth felt lined with improperly tanned suede.

He was quickly fitting into the routine of the office. Actually, it worked smoothly enough that little effort was demanded of him. The Czech employees handled almost all the details. Evidently, the word of his evening on the town had somehow spread, and the fact that he was prone to a good time had relieved their fears of a martinet sent down from the central offices. They were beginning to relax in his presence.

In fact, they relaxed to the point where one of the girls didn't even bother to hide the book she was reading during a period where there was a lull in activity. It was Pasternak's "Doctor Zhivago."

He frowned remembering vaguely the controversy over the book a couple of decades earlier. Ilya Simonov said, "Pasternak. Do they print his works here in Czechoslovakia?"

The girl shrugged and looked at the back of the cover. "German publisher," she said idly. "Printed in Frankfurt."

He kept his voice from registering either surprise or disapproval. "You mean such books are imported? By whom?"

"Oh, not imported by an official agency, but we Czechs are doing a good deal more travel than we used

to. Business trips, tourist trips, vacations. And, of course, we bring back books you can't get here." She shrugged again. "Very common."

Simonov said blankly. "But the customs. The border police—"

She smiled in a manner that suggested he lacked sophistication. "They never bother any more. They're human, too."

Ilya Simonov wandered off. He was astonished at the extent to which controls were slipping in a satellite country. There seemed practically no discipline, in the old sense, at all. He began to see one reason why his superior had sent him here to Prague. For years, most of his work had been either in Moscow or in the newly opened industrial areas in Siberia. He had lost touch with developments in this part of the Soviet Complex.

It came to him that this sort of thing could work like a geometric progression. Give a man a bit of rope one day, and he expects, and takes, twice as much the next, and twice that the next. And as with individuals, so with whole populations.

This was going to have to be stopped soon, or Party control would disappear. Ilya Simonov felt an edge of uncertainty. Nikita Khrushchev should never have made those first motions of liberalization following Stalin's death. Not if they eventually culminated in this sort of thing.

He and Catherina drove to her meeting place that evening after dinner.

She explained as they went that the group was quite informal, usu-



ally meeting at the homes of group members who had fairly large places in the country. She didn't seem to know how it had originally begun. The meetings had been going on for a year or more before she arrived in Prague. A Czech friend had taken her along one night, and she'd been attending ever since. There were other, similar groups, in town.

"But what's the purpose of the organization?" Simonov asked her.

She was driving her little air-cushion Moskvich. They crossed over the Vltava River by the Cechuv Bridge and turned right. On the hill above them loomed the fantastically large statue of Stalin which had been raised immediately following the Second War. She grimaced at it, muttered, "I wonder if he was insane from the first."

He hadn't understood her change of subject. "How do you mean?" he said.

"Stalin. I wonder how early it was in his career that he went insane."

This was the second time in the past few days that Ilya Simonov had run into this matter of the former dictator's mental condition. He said now, "I've heard the opinion before. Where did you pick it up?"

"Oh, it's quite commonly believed in the Western countries."

"But, have you ever been, ah, West?"

"Oh, from time to time. Berlin, Vienna, Geneva. Even Paris twice, on vacation, you know, and to various conferences. But that's not what I mean. In the western magazines and

newspapers. You can get them here in Prague now. But to get back to your question. There is no particular purpose of the organization."

She turned the car left on Budenská and sped up into the Holešovice section of town.

The nonchalance of it all was what stopped Ilya Simonov. Here was a Party member calmly discussing whether or not the greatest Russian of them all, after Lenin, had been mad. The implications were, of course, that many of the purges, certainly the latter ones, were the result of the whims of a mental case, that the Soviet Complex had for long years been ruled by a man as unbalanced as Czar Peter the Great.

They pulled up before a rather large house that would have been called a dacha back in Moscow. Evidently, Ilya Simonov decided, whoever was sponsoring this night's get together, was a man of prominence. He grimaced inwardly. A lot of high placed heads were going to roll before he was through.

It turned out that the host was Leos Dvorak, the internationally famed cinema director and quite an idol of Ilya Simonov in his earlier days when he'd found more time for entertainment. It was a shock to meet the man under these circumstances.

Catherina Panova was obviously quite popular among this gathering. Their host gave her an affectionate squeeze in way of greeting, then shook hands with Simonov when Catherina introduced him.

"Newly from Moscow, eh?" the film director said, squinting at the security agent. He had a sharp glance, almost, it seemed to Simonov, as though he detected the real nature of the newcomer. "It's been several years since I've been to Moscow. Are things loosening up there?"

"Loosening up?" Simonov said.

Leos Dvorak laughed and said to Catherina, "Probably not. I've always been of the opinion that the Party's influence would shrivel away first at its extremities. Membership would fall off abroad, in the neutral countries and in Common Europe and the Americas. Then in the so-called satellite countries. Last of all in Russia herself. But, very last, Moscow—the dulllest stodgiest, most backward intellectually, capital city in the world." The director laughed again and turned away to greet a new guest.

This was open treason. Ilya Simonov had been lucky. Within the first few days of being in the Czech capital he'd contacted one of the groups which he'd been sent to unmask.

Now he said mildly to Catherina Panova, "He seems rather outspoken."

She chuckled. "Leos is quite strongly opinionated. His theory is that the more successful the Party is in attaining the goals it set half a century ago, the less necessary it becomes. He's of the opinion that it will eventually atrophy, shrivel away to the point that all that will be needed will be the slightest of pushes to end its domination."

Ilya Simonov said, "And the rest of the group here, do they agree?"

Catherina shrugged. "Some do, some don't. Some of them are of the opinion that it will take another blood bath. That the party will attempt to hang onto its power and will have to be destroyed."

Simonov said evenly, "And you? What do you think?"

She frowned, prettily. "I'm not sure. I suppose I'm still in the process of forming an opinion."

Their host was calling them together and leading the way to the garden where chairs had been set up. There seemed to be about twenty-five persons present in all. Ilya Simonov had been introduced to no more than half of them. His memory was good and already he was composing a report to Kliment Blagonravov, listing those names he recalled. Some were Czechs, some citizens of other satellite countries, several, including Catherina, were actually Russians.

The American, a newspaperman named Dickson, had an open-faced freshness, hardly plausible in an agent from the West trying to subvert Party leadership. Ilya Simonov couldn't quite figure him out.

Dickson was introduced by Leos Dvorak who informed his guests that the American had been reluctant but had finally agreed to give them his opinions on the press on both sides of what had once been called the Iron Curtain.

Dickson grinned boyishly and said, "I'm not a public speaker, and, for

that matter, I haven't had time to put together a talk for you. I think what I'll do is read a little clipping I've got here—sort of a text—and then, well, throw the meeting open to questions. I'll try to answer anything you have to ask."

He brought forth a piece of paper. "This is from the British writer, Huxley. I think it's pretty good." He cleared his voice and began to read.

Mass communication . . . is simply a force and like any other force, it can be used either well or ill. Used one way, the press, the radio and the cinema are indispensable to the survival of democracy. Used in another way, they are among the most powerful weapons in the dictator's armory. In the field of mass communications as in almost every other field of enterprise, technological progress has hurt the Little Man and helped the Big Man. As lately as fifty years ago, every democratic country could boast of a great number of small journals and local newspapers. Thousands of country editors expressed thousands of independent opinions. Somewhere or other almost anybody could get almost anything printed. Today the press is still legally free; but most of the little papers have disappeared. The cost of wood pulp, of modern printing machinery and of syndicated news is too high for the Little Man. In the totalitarian East there is political censorship, and the media of mass communications are controlled by the State. In the democratic West there is economic censorship and the media of mass communi-

cation are controlled by members of the Power Elite. Censorship by rising costs and the concentration of communication-power in the hands of a few big concerns is less objectionable than State Ownership and government propaganda; but certainly it is not something to which a Jeffersonian democrat could approve.

Ilya Simonov looked blankly at Catherina and whispered, "Why, what he's reading is as much an attack on the West as it is on us."

She looked at him and whispered back, "Well, why not? This gathering is to discuss freedom of the press."

He said blankly, "But as an agent of the West—"

She frowned at him. "Mr. Dickson isn't an agent of the West. He's an American journalist."

"Surely you can't believe he has no connections with the imperialist governments."

"Certainly, he hasn't. What sort of meeting do you think this is? We're not interested in Western propaganda. We're a group of intellectuals searching for freedom of ideas."

Ilya Simonov was taken back once again.

Colonel Ilya Simonov dismissed his cab in front of the Ministry and walked toward the gate. Down the street the same plainclothes man, who had been lounging there the last time he'd reported, once again took him in, then looked away. The two guards snapped to attention, and the security agent strode by them unnoticed.

At the lieutenant's desk, before the offices of Kliment Blagonravov, he stopped and said, "Colonel Simonov. I have no appointment but I think the Minister will see me."

"Yes, Comrade Colonel," the lieutenant said. He spoke into an inter-office communicator, then looked up. "Minister Blagonravov will be able to see you in a few minutes, sir."

Ilya Simonov stared nervously and unseeingly out a window while he waited. Gorki Park lay across the way. It, like Moscow in general, had changed a good deal in Simonov's memory. Everything in Russia had changed a good deal, he realized. And was changing. And what was the end to be? Or was there ever an end? Of course not. There is no end, ever. Only new changes to come.

The lieutenant said, "The Minister is free now, Comrade Colonel."

Ilya Simonov muttered something to him and pushed his way through the heavy door.

Blagonravov looked up from his desk and rumbled affectionately, "Ilya! It's good to see you. Have a drink! You've lost weight, Ilya!"

His top field man sank into the same chair he'd occupied nine months before, and accepted the ice-cold vodka.

Blagonravov poured another drink for himself, then scowled at the other. "Where have you been? When you first went off to Prague, I got reports from you almost every day. These last few months I've hardly heard from you." He rumbled his version of a chuckle. "If I didn't know

you better, I'd think there was a woman."

Ilya Simonov looked at him wanly. "That too, Kliment."

"You are jesting!"

"No. Not really. I had hoped to become engaged—soon."

"A party member? I never thought of you as the marrying type, Ilya."

Simon said slowly, "Yes, a Party member. Catherina Panova, my assistant in the automobile agency in Prague."

Blagonravov scowled heavily at him, put forth his fat lips in a thoughtful pout. He came to his feet, approached a file cabinet, fishing from his pocket a key ring. He unlocked the cabinet, brought forth a sheaf of papers with which he returned to his desk. He fumbled through them for a moment, found the paper he wanted and read it. He scowled again and looked up at his agent.

"Your first report," he said. "Catherina Panova. From what you say here, a dangerous reactionary. Certainly she has no place in Party ranks."

Ilya Simonov said, "Is that the complete file of my assignment?"

"Yes. I've kept it here in my own office. I've wanted this to be ultra-undercover. No one except you and me. I had hopes of you working your way up into the enemy's organization, and I wanted no possible chance of you being betrayed. You don't seem to have been too successful."

"I was as successful as it's possible to be."

The security minister leaned forward. "Ah ha! I knew I could trust you to bring back results, Ilya. This will take Frol Zverev's pressure off me. Number One has been riding me hard." Blagonravov poured them both another drink. "You were able to insert yourself into their higher circles?"

Simonov said, "Kliment, there are no higher circles."

His chief glared at him. "Nonsense!" He tapped the file with a pudgy finger. "In your early reports you described several groups, small organizations, illegal meetings. There must be an upper organization, some movement supported from the West most likely."

Ilya Simonov was shaking his head. "No. They're all spontaneous."

His chief growled, "I tell you there are literally thousands of these little groups. That hardly sounds like a spontaneous phenomenon."

"Nevertheless, that is what my investigations have led me to believe."

Blagonravov glowered at him, uncertainly. Finally, he said, "Well, confirmed it, you've spent the better part of a year among them. What's it all about? What do they want?"

Ilya Simonov said flatly, "They want freedom, Kliment."

"Freedom! What do you mean, freedom? The Soviet Complex is the most highly industrialized area of the world. Our people have the highest standard of living anywhere. Don't they understand? We've met all the promises we ever made. We've reached far and beyond the point ever

dreamed of by Utopians. The people, all of the people, have it made as the Americans say."

"Except for freedom," Simonov said doggedly. "These groups are springing up everywhere, spontaneously. Thus far, perhaps, our ministry has been able to suppress some of them. But the pace is accelerating. They aren't inter-organized now. But how soon they'll start to be, I don't know. Sooner or later, someone is going to come up with a unifying idea. A new socio-political system to advocate a way of guaranteeing the basic liberties. Then, of course, the fat will be in the fire."

"Ilya! You've been working too hard. I've pushed you too much, relied on you too much. You need a good lengthy vacation."

Simonov shrugged. "Perhaps. But what I've just said is the truth."

His chief snorted heavily. "You half sound as though you agree with them."

"I do, Kliment."

"I am in no mood for gags, as the Yankees say."

Ilya Simonov looked at him wearily. He said slowly, "You sent me to investigate an epidemic, a spreading disease. Very well, I report that it's highly contagious."

Blagonravov poured himself more vodka angrily. "Explain yourself. What's this all about?"

His former best field man said, "Kliment—"

"I want no familiarities from you, colonel!"

"Yes, sir." Ilya Simonov went on doggedly. "Man never achieves complete freedom. It's a goal never reached, but one continually striven for. The moment as small a group as two or three gather together, all of them must give up some of the individual's freedom. When man associates with millions of his fellow men, he gives up a good many freedoms for the sake of the community. But always he works to retain as much liberty as possible, and to gain more. It's the nature of our species, I suppose."

"You sound as though you've become corrupted by Western ideas," the security head muttered dangerously.

Simonov shook his head. "No. The same thing applies over there. Even in countries such as Sweden and Switzerland, where institutions are as free as anywhere in the world, the people are continually striving for more. Governments and socio-economic systems seem continually to whittle away at individual liberty. But always man fights back and tries to achieve new heights for himself.

"In the name of developing our country, the Party all but eliminated freedom in the Soviet Complex, but now the goals have been reached and the people will no longer put up with us, sir."

"Us!" Kliment Blagonravov growled bitterly. "You are hardly to be considered in the Party's ranks any longer, Simonov. Why in the world did you ever return here?" He sneered fatly. "Your best bet

would have been to escape over the border into the West."

Simonov looked at the file on the other's desk. "I wanted to regain those reports I made in the early days of my assignment. I've listed in them some fifty names, names of men and women who are now my friends.

The fat lips worked in and out. "It must be that woman. You've become soft in the head, Simonov." Blagonravov tapped the file beneath his heavy fingers. "Never fear, before the week is out these fifty persons will be either in prison or in their graves."

With a fluid motion, Ilya Simonov produced a small caliber gun, a special model designed for security agents. An unusual snout proclaimed its quiet virtues as guns go.

"No, Kliment," Ilya Simonov said.

"Are you mad!"

"No, Kliment, but I must have those reports." Ilya Simonov came to his feet and reached for them.

With a roar of rage, Kliment Blagonravov slammed open a drawer and dove a beefy paw into it. With shocking speed for so heavy a man, he scooped up a heavy military revolver.

And Colonel Ilya Simonov shot him neatly and accurately in the head. The silenced gun made no more sound than a pop.

Blagonravov, his dying eyes registering unbelieving shock, fell back into his heavy swivel chair.

Simonov worked quickly. He gathered up his reports, checked quickly

to see they were all there. Struck a match, lit one of the reports and dropped it into the large ashtray on the desk. One by one he lit them all and when all were consumed, stirred the ashes until they were completely pulverized.

He poured himself another vodka, downed it, stiff wristed, then without turning to look at the dead man again, made his way to the door.

He slipped out and said to the lieutenant, "The Minister says that he is under no circumstances to be disturbed for the next hour."

The lieutenant frowned at him. "But he has an appointment."

Colonel Ilya Simonov shrugged. "Those were his instructions. Not to be bothered under any circumstances."

"But it was an appointment with Number One!"

That was bad. And unforeseen. Ilya Simonov said, "It's probably been canceled. All I'm saying is that Minister Blagonravov instructs you not to bother him under any circumstances for the next hour."

He left the other and strode down the corridor, keeping himself from too obvious a quickened pace.

At the entrance to the Ministry, he shot his glance up and down the street. He was in the clutch now, and knew it. He had few illusions.

Not a cab in sight. He began to cross the road toward the park. In a matter of moments there, he'd be lost in the trees and shrubbery. He had rather vague plans. Actually, he was playing things as they came.

There was a close friend in whose apartment he could hide, a man who owed him his life. He could disguise himself. Possibly buy or borrow a car. If he could get back to Prague, he was safe. Perhaps he and Catherina could defect to the West.

Somebody was screaming something from a window in the Ministry.

Ilya Simonov quickened his pace. He was nearly across the street now. He thought, foolishly, *Whoever that is shouting is so excited he sounds more like a woman than a man.*

Another voice took up the shout. It was the plainclothes man. Feet began pounding.

There were two more shouts. The

guards. But he was across now. The shrubs were only a foot away.

The shattering blackness hit him in the back of the head. It was over immediately.

Afterwards, the plainclothes man and the two guards stood over him. Men began pouring from the Ministry in their direction.

Colonel Ilya Simonov was a meaningless, bloody heap on the edge of the park's grass.

The guard who had shot said, "He killed the Minister. He must have been crazy to think he could get away with it. What did he want?"

"Well, we'll never know now," the plainclothesman grunted.

THE END

(Continued from page 58)

So we make up a table, and, just before closing this issue, we added up the scores. Each first place vote a story gets gives it a "1" on the table; second-place gives it "2", and so on. We add up the score each story made, divide by the number of votes, and get the "point score" shown below. And this determines the winner.

The authors very much hope you vote . . . if you like their story, that is. Of course, he'd prefer you to forget to vote if you're voting him in fourth or fifth place! They have an immediate and acute interest; the story that you readers vote into the #1 spot gets a 1¢ per word bonus; second place carries a 1/2¢ a word bonus. Mark Phillips is, therefore, some \$200 richer for your letters of commendation. (This is a one-way deal; the author doesn't have to ante up anything if you vote his story a stinker.)

So . . . and here's the score on the November 1960 issue:

PLACE	STORY	AUTHOR	POINTS
1.	Occasion for Disaster (Pt. 1)	Mark Phillips	2.10
2.	Oomphel in the Sky	H. Beam Piper	2.67
3.	The Crackpot	Theodore L. Thomas	2.96
4.	Sunspot	Hal Clement	3.14
5.	The Piebald Horse	E. C. Tubb	3.82

The Editor.

PROGRESS REPORT:

By G. HARRY STINE



IN MY article, "Time For Tom Swift," last month, the suggestion was made that it was perhaps time for new concepts in the field of manned space travel. It was further stated that our present manned space-flight concepts were built around a propulsion system instead of around the human passenger.

It is highly proper, from the engineering standpoint, to attempt manned space flight now with the concepts and hardware available. If Columbus had waited for steamships, he would still have been waiting on the day of his death. Even if a new concept were developed this instant in "the lonely mind of a man," it would be several years at least before the new idea could be translated into workable hardware. There is an incredible amount of fiddling engineering detail that must be attended to. In this process, one must always be careful to discriminate between original conceptual quantum jumps and technical "breakthroughs" that occur in the development of hardware itself.

Our breakout into space has been going on for some time. The conceptual progress of ideas reached its frantic peak on the intense theoretical work of Goddard, Oberth, Hoh-

mann, and others in the 1920s. The technical progress in the development of hardware based on these concepts is now reaching its peak.

In spite of the considerable advancement of solid propellant rocketry in the last ten years, the liquid propellant rocket propulsion system is still the prime propulsion system for the initial conquest of space by Man. Although solid propellants offer many advantages, the liquid chemical systems have at least twenty-five per cent better performance in exhaust velocity. Since initial space flight will require every erg of energy the engineers can harness in a vehicle, liquid systems must be used.

All the basic hardware developments in liquid propellant rocketry were made before the half-century mark. Goddard flew the first liquid propellant rocket in March, 1926. James Wyld developed the regeneratively-cooled combustion chamber about 1935—and this basic chamber is used in nearly every long-burning liquid propellant rocket engine today. Goddard developed the first propellant pump about 1935, thus opening the way for engineers to build liquid rockets as large as necessary. The clustered rocket engines used in the present *Saturn* rocket are not new; Reaction Motors, Inc. developed their clustered liquid rocket

SUPER V-2 PROGRAM

Today's rockets are bigger, more complex, more expensive . . . but are they better? Dr. Goddard used the same basic techniques in the late 1920s.

engine about 1945, and it was used to push the Bell X-1 through the sound barrier. General Electric and the Jet Propulsion Laboratory were the first to achieve a staged liquid propellant rocket: the V-2/WAC Corporal "Bumper" of 1949.

Today, we have liquid hydrogen-liquid oxygen propellants, lighter thrust chambers, higher combustion pressures, somewhat higher exhaust velocities . . . but nothing really as new as the things mentioned in the above paragraph. For ten years, rocket men have been refining hardware. For twenty years, they have been building better V-2 rockets.

The V-2 rocket is more historically significant than most people realize. Just as Goddard founded the whole field of liquid propulsion, the V-2 sired a whole line of progeny in big liquid rockets.

The V-2 used liquid oxygen and a hydrocarbon fuel, alcohol. Even the mighty *Titan* ICBM uses liquid oxygen and a hydrocarbon fuel, a form of kerosene called RP-4. So does the huge *Saturn*.

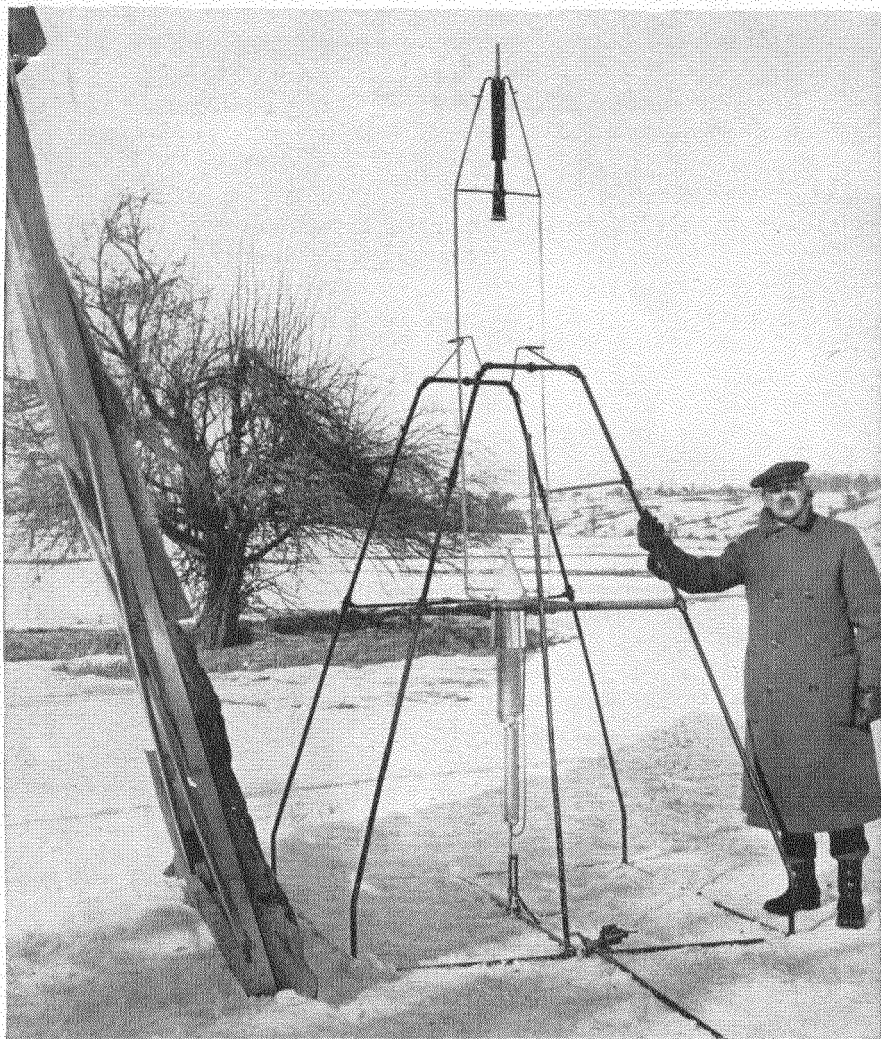
All modern liquid rockets use propellant pumps; the V-2 was the first, and its pump design influenced all succeeding pump designs.

The V-2 rocket was used as the first big lower stage booster in the *Bumper* project.

Accompanying this article are some remarkable photographs which bear documentary evidence to the statements herein. The unusual photographic pairs were not deliberately posed as such; they just happened. The family tree of liquid propellant space vehicles shows three distinct branches: pump-fed rockets characterized by the V-2, pressure-fed rockets growing out of the WAC Corporal, and rocket-powered aircraft stemming from the Messerschmidt Me-262 "Komet." But this family tree is complex. The pressure-fed rocket practically drops out of the picture with the advent of the first manned space vehicles, Dyna-Soar and Mercury.

The V-2 rocket, which spawned nearly all present-day space vehicles, was primarily designed to get around the Treaty of Versailles. This treaty forbids Germans to have heavy, long-range artillery. The V-2 was the answer; nothing was said about rockets.

We have taken the V-2, the rocket-powered artillery shell, and put men in it. Perhaps it is time we stopped thinking of space flight in terms of the Gun Club of Jules Verne. Perhaps it is time we looked to another of Verne's gadgets: the long-range submarine. This might suggest quite a different vehicle as the second generation spaceship.

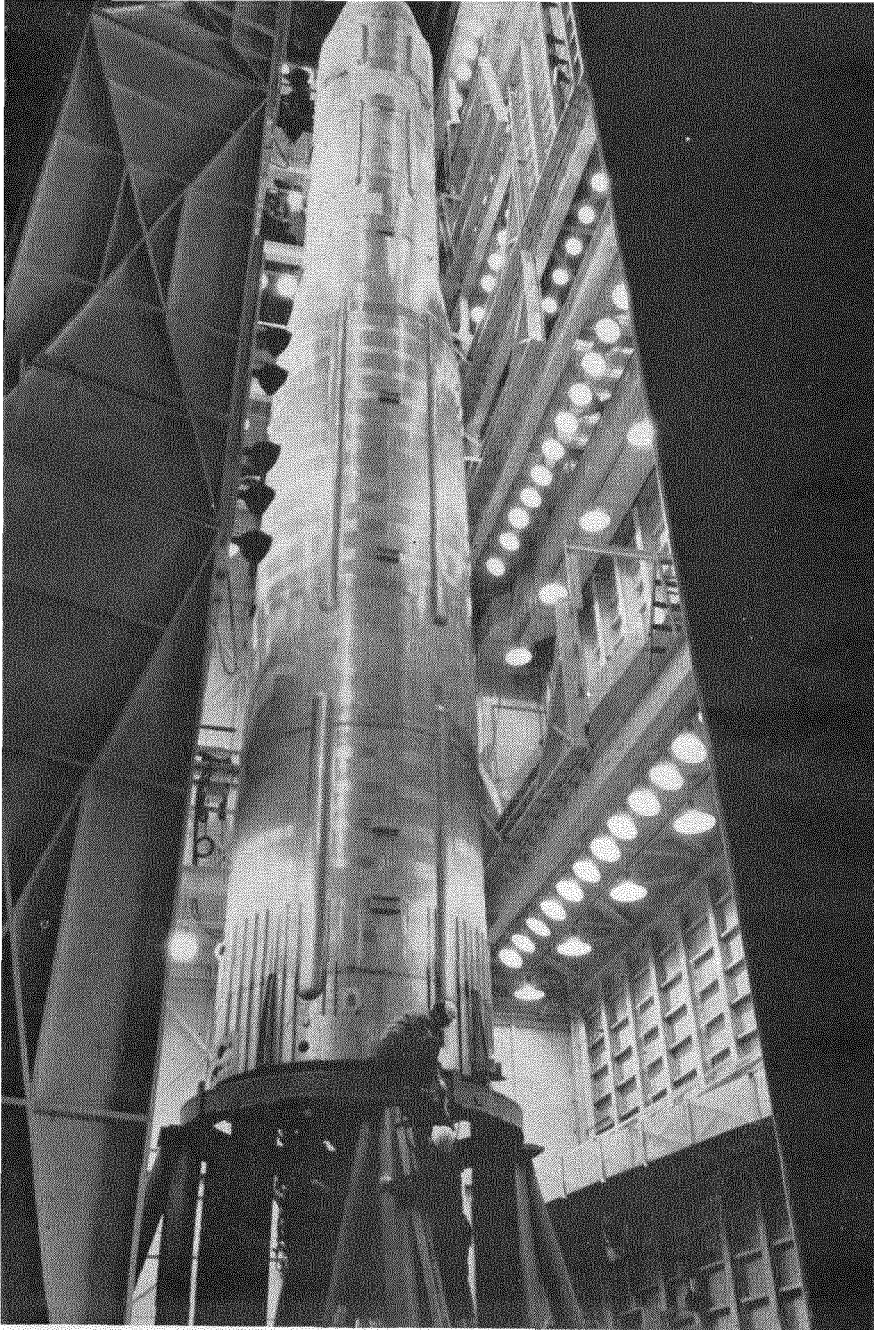


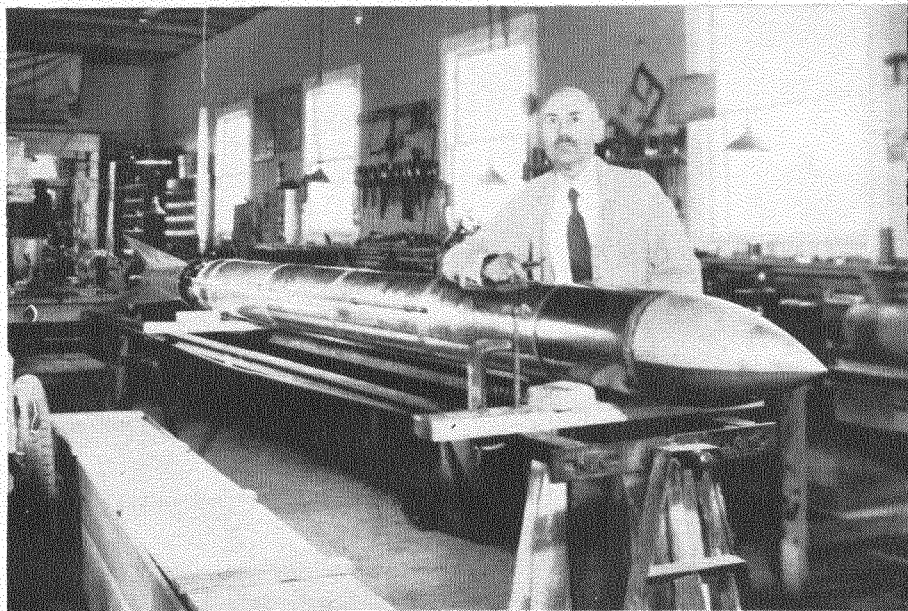
Dr. Robert H. Goddard stands by his first successful liquid propellant rocket on the Ward Farm, Auburn, Massachusetts. The date: March 16, 1926. Rocket propellants used: liquid oxygen and hydrocarbon (gasoline).

Courtesy: Mrs. Robert H. Goddard

Titan ICBM (1960) being checked at the Martin factory, Denver, Colorado. Rocket propellants used: liquid oxygen and hydrocarbon (RP-4).

U.S. Air Force Photo



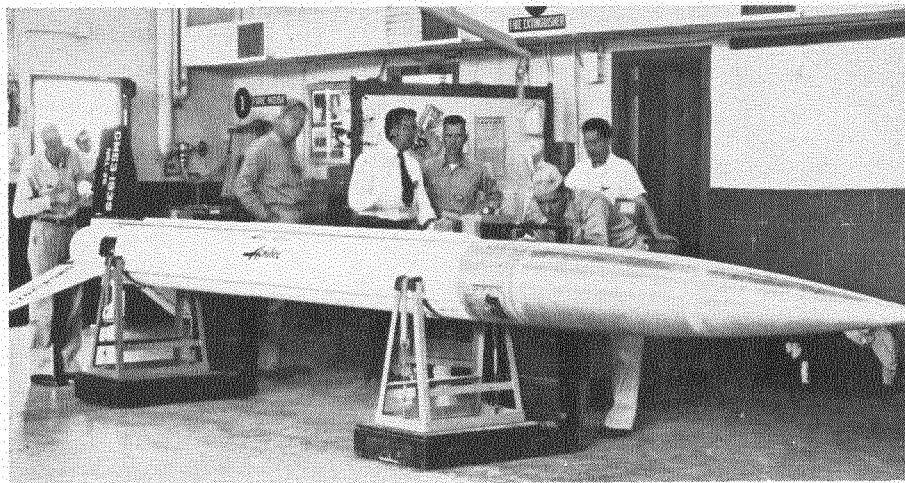


Courtesy: Mrs. Robert H. Goddard

Above: Dr. Robert H. Goddard standing beside one of his liquid propellant rockets at Roswell, New Mexico, in November 1935.

Below: At White Sands Proving Ground, New Mexico (October 1955) technicians check out an Aerobee liquid propellant rocket.

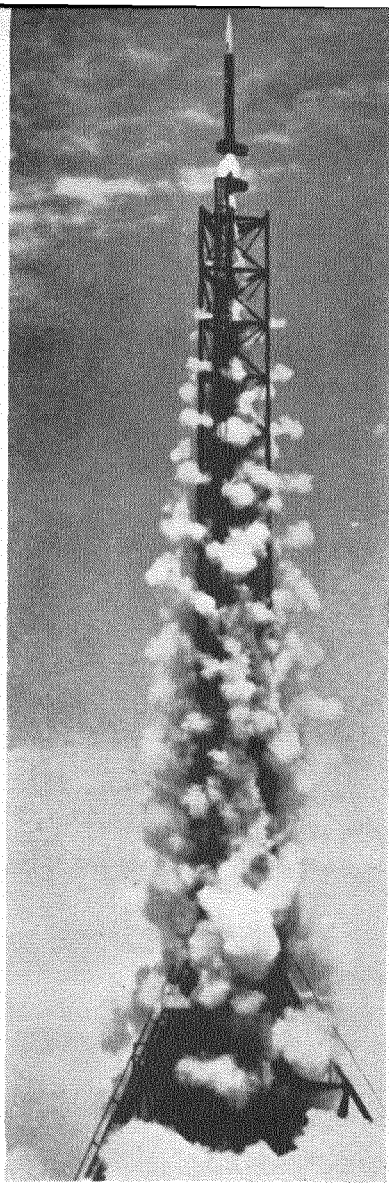
U.S. Navy Photo





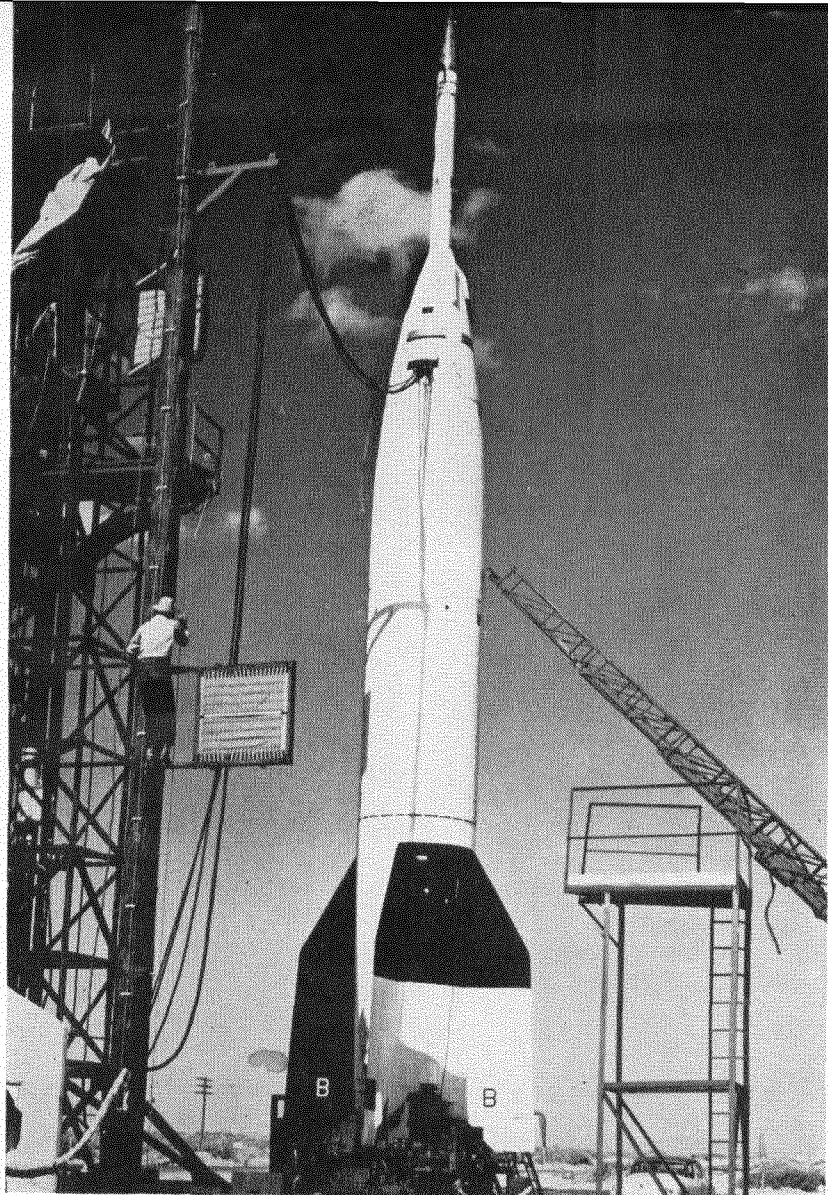
The takeoff of one of Dr. Robert H. Goddard's liquid propellant rockets near Roswell, New Mexico, in 1935.

Courtesy: Mrs. Robert H. Goddard



The takeoff of an Aerobee research rocket, liquid propellant, from White Sands Proving Ground, New Mexico, in 1955.

U.S. Navy Photo

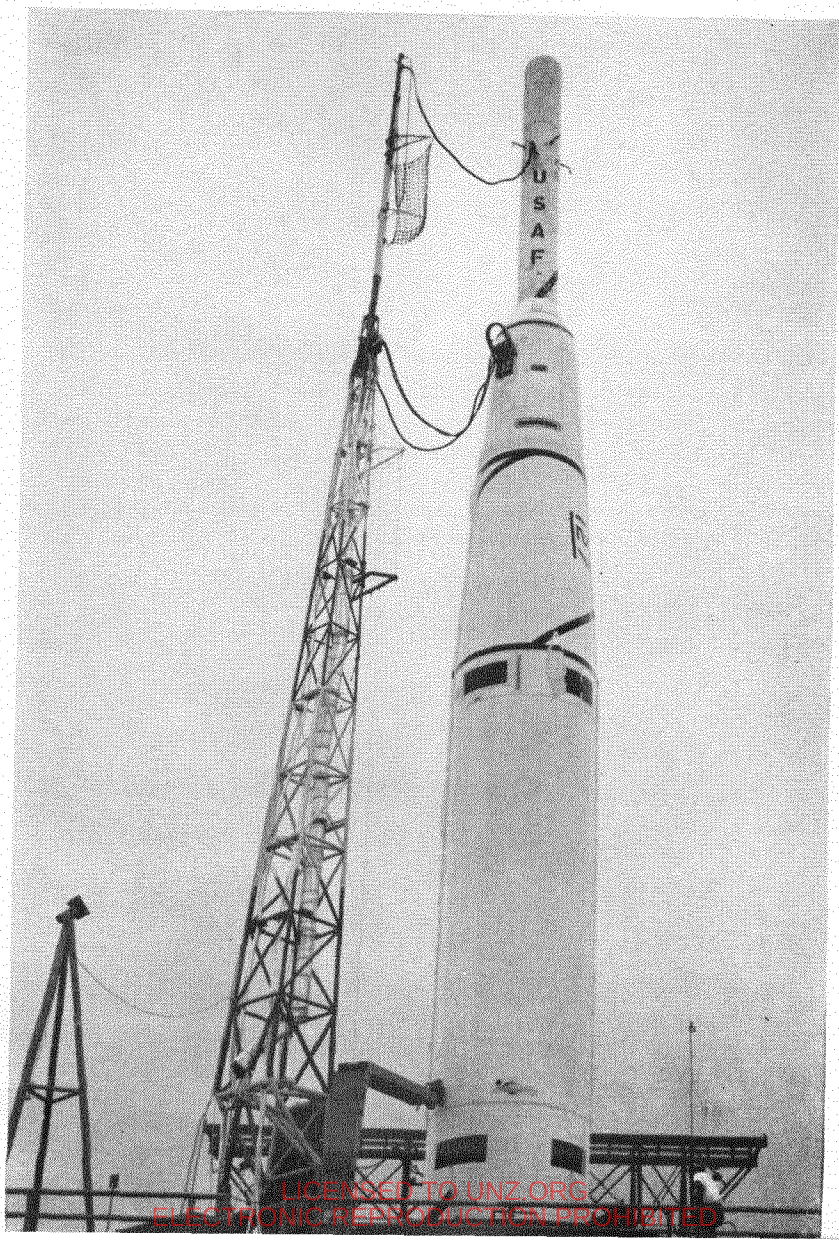


U.S. Army Ordnance

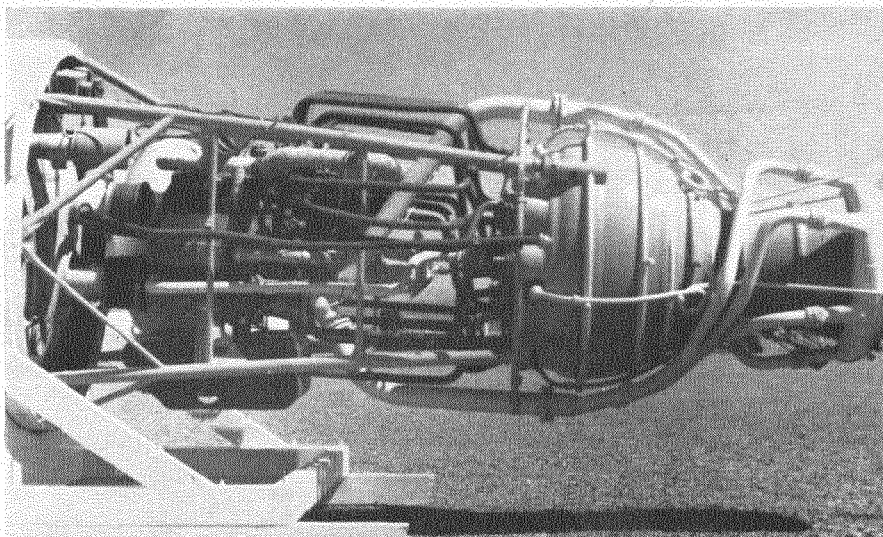
The first successful two-staged liquid propellant rocket, the V-2/Wac Corporal combination called "Bumper." Fired 1949. Lower stage engine used liquid oxygen and alcohol. Upper stage used hypergolic propellants.

The Thor-Able moon rocket, a combination of the Thor IRBM and the second stage of the Vanguard rocket. Fired 1958. Lower stage engine used liquid oxygen and hydrocarbon. Upper stage used hypergolic propellants. Last stage was solid propellant.

U.S. Air Force Photo



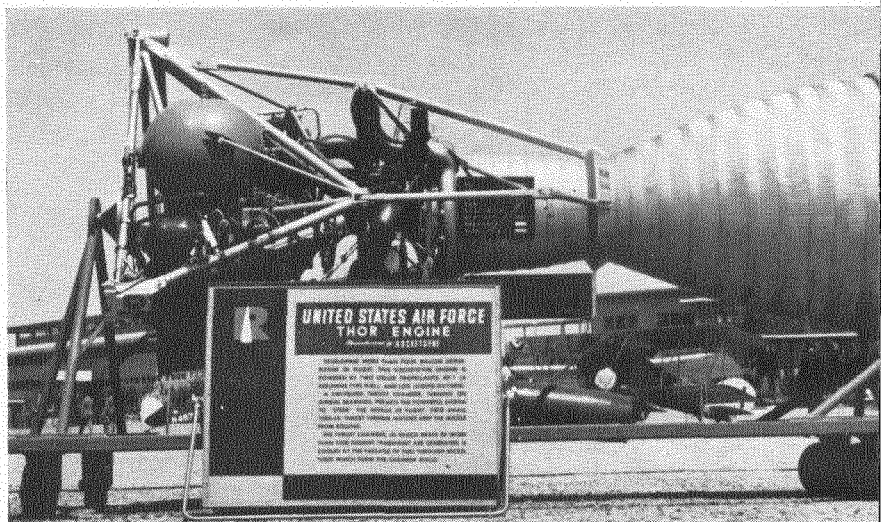
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Above: The liquid propellant rocket engine of the V-2. Developed circa 1940. Propellant pump driven by decomposition of hydrogen peroxide. Propellants: liquid oxygen and alcohol. Thrust: 55,000 pounds.

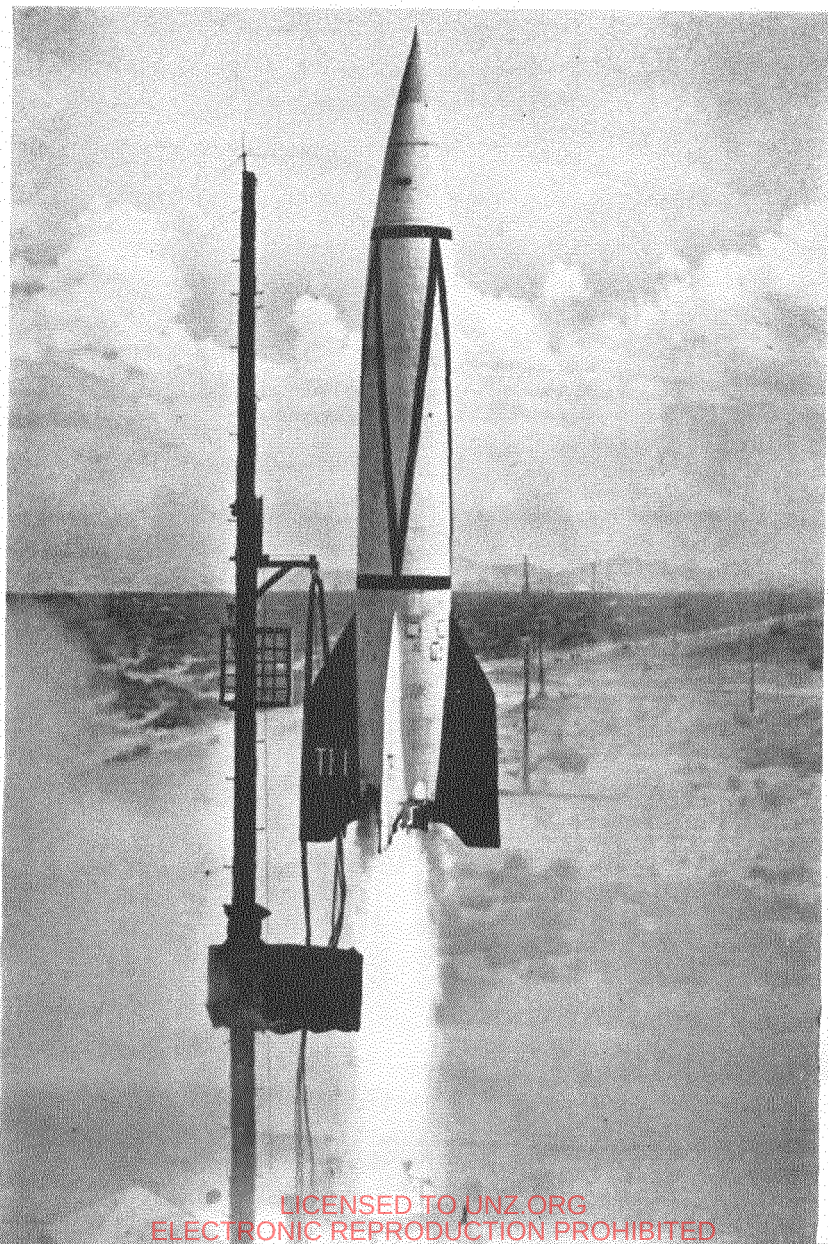
Below: The liquid propellant rocket engine of the Thor. Developed circa 1955. Propellant pump driven by decomposition of hydrogen peroxide. Propellants: liquid oxygen and hydrocarbon. Thrust: 150,000 pounds.

Photos by Author



The German "Aggregat 4" (A4) known to the world as Vergeltungswaffe-Zwei (V-2). Developed at Peenemunde. First flight, October 14, 1942. Gross weight 13 tons. Thrust: 55,000 pounds. Range: 220 miles. Max. altitude: 135 miles. Payload: 2200 lbs.

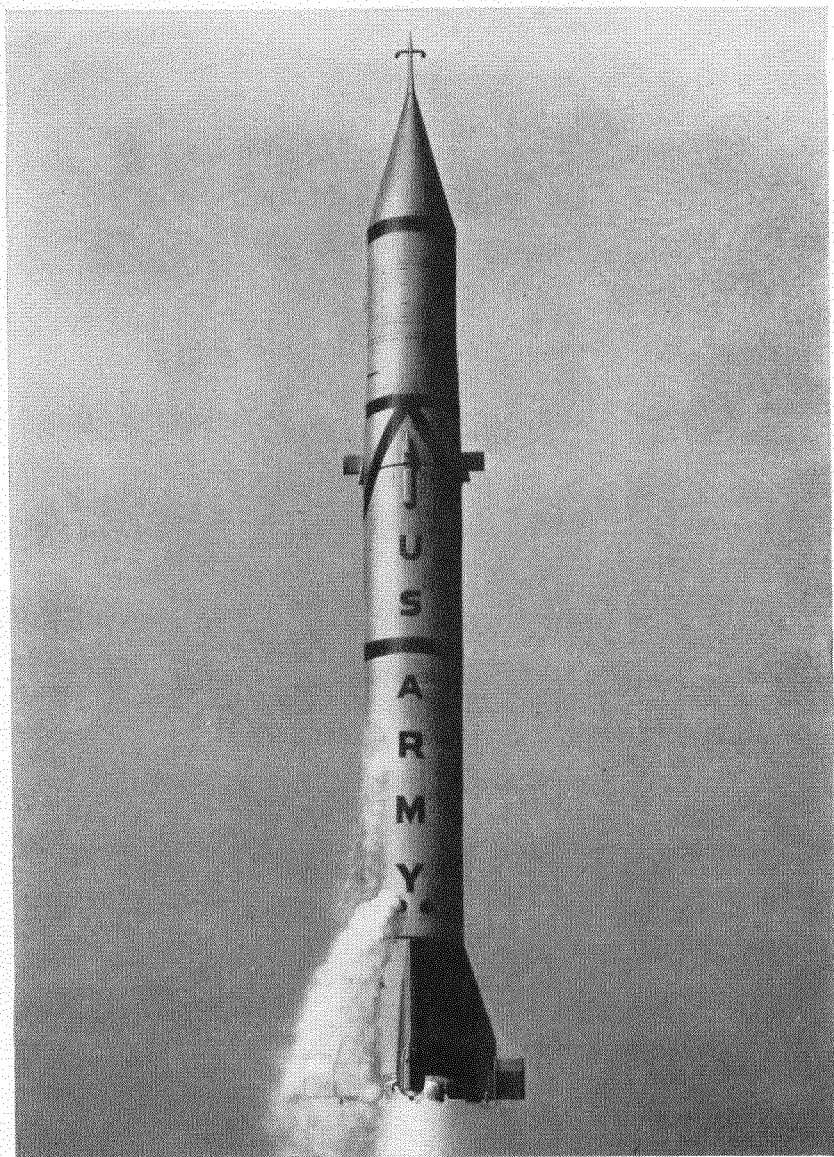
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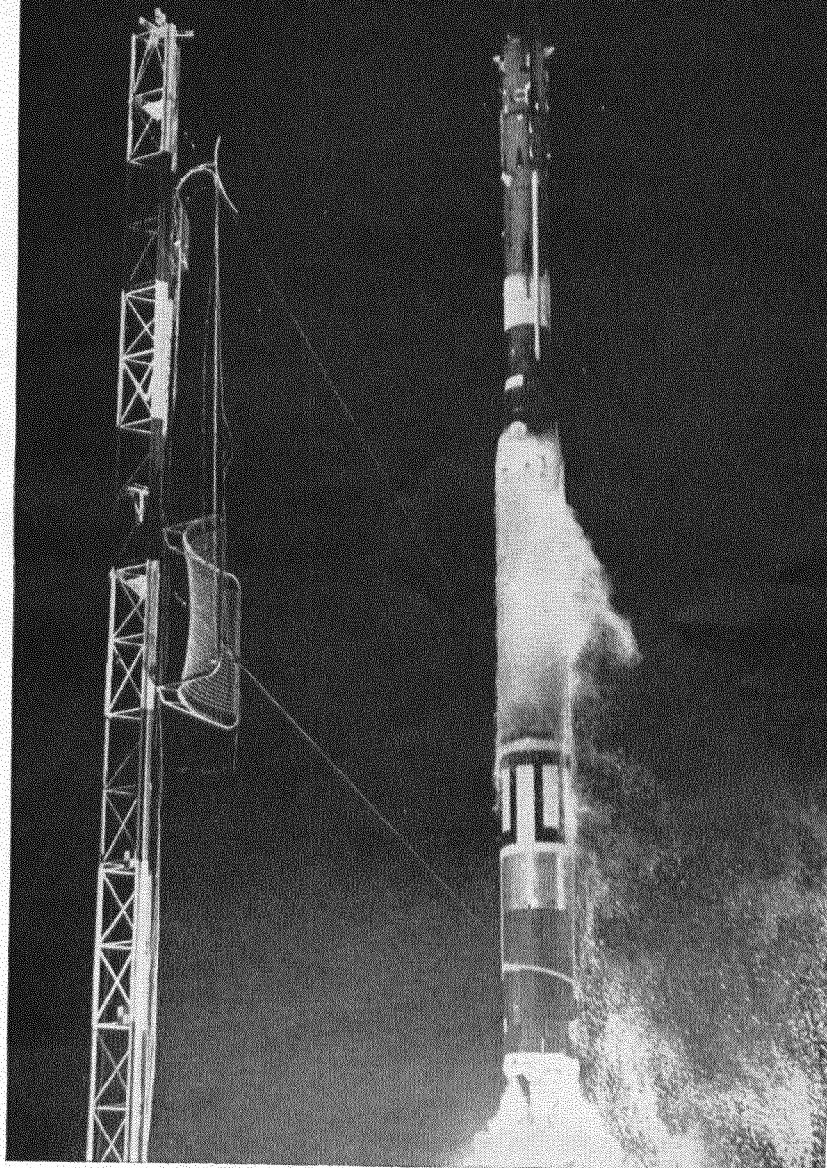


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The Army *Redstone*. Developed at Redstone Arsenal by the Pennemunde team. First flight 1954. Gross weight 31 tons. Thrust: 75,000 pounds. Range: 200 miles. Direct descendant of V-2.

U.S. Army Photograph





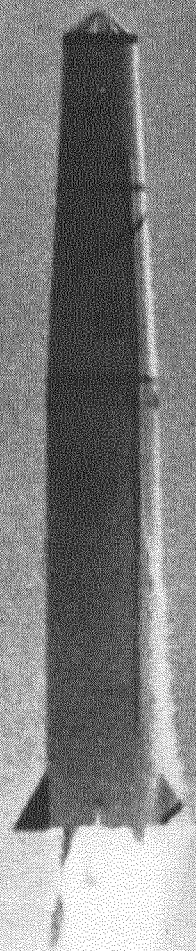
U.S. Air Force Photo

The Vanguard. Direct developments from the Viking. Three-staged. Gross weight: 12 tons. Orbit: 100 pounds at 300 miles.

PROGRESS REPORT: SUPER V-2 PROGRAM

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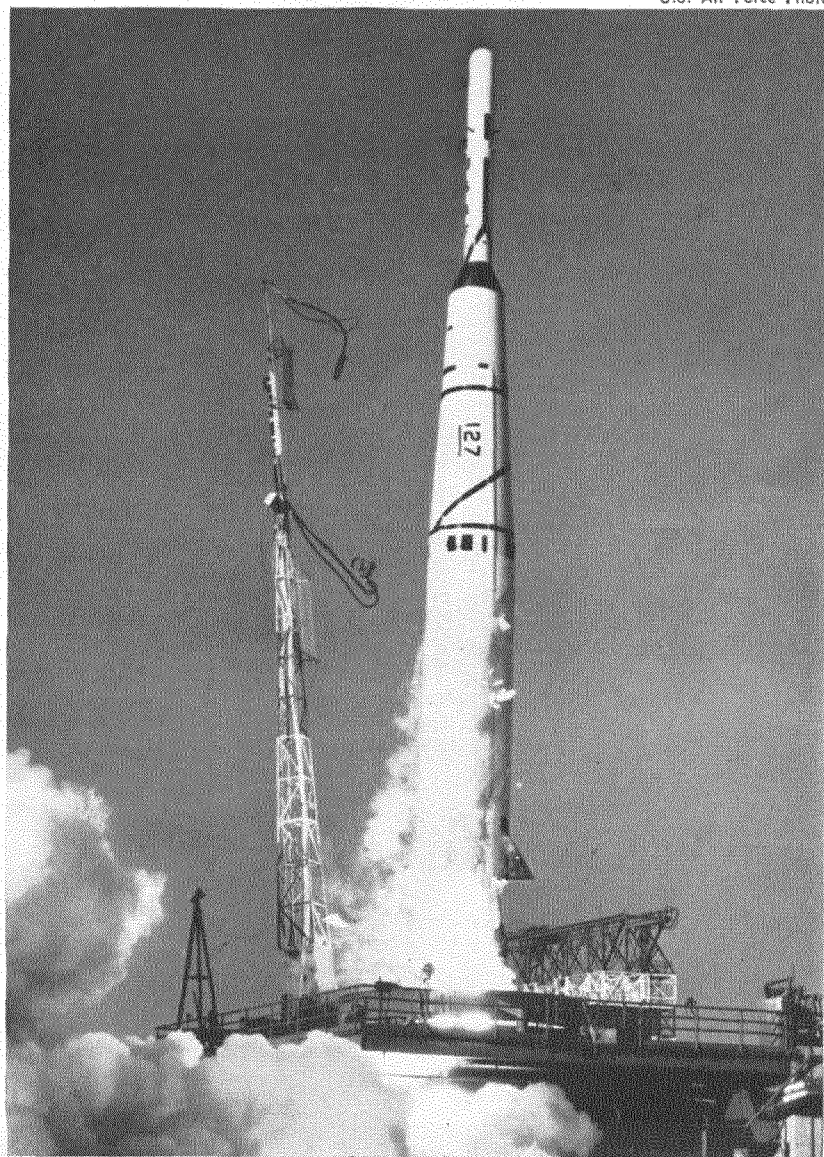
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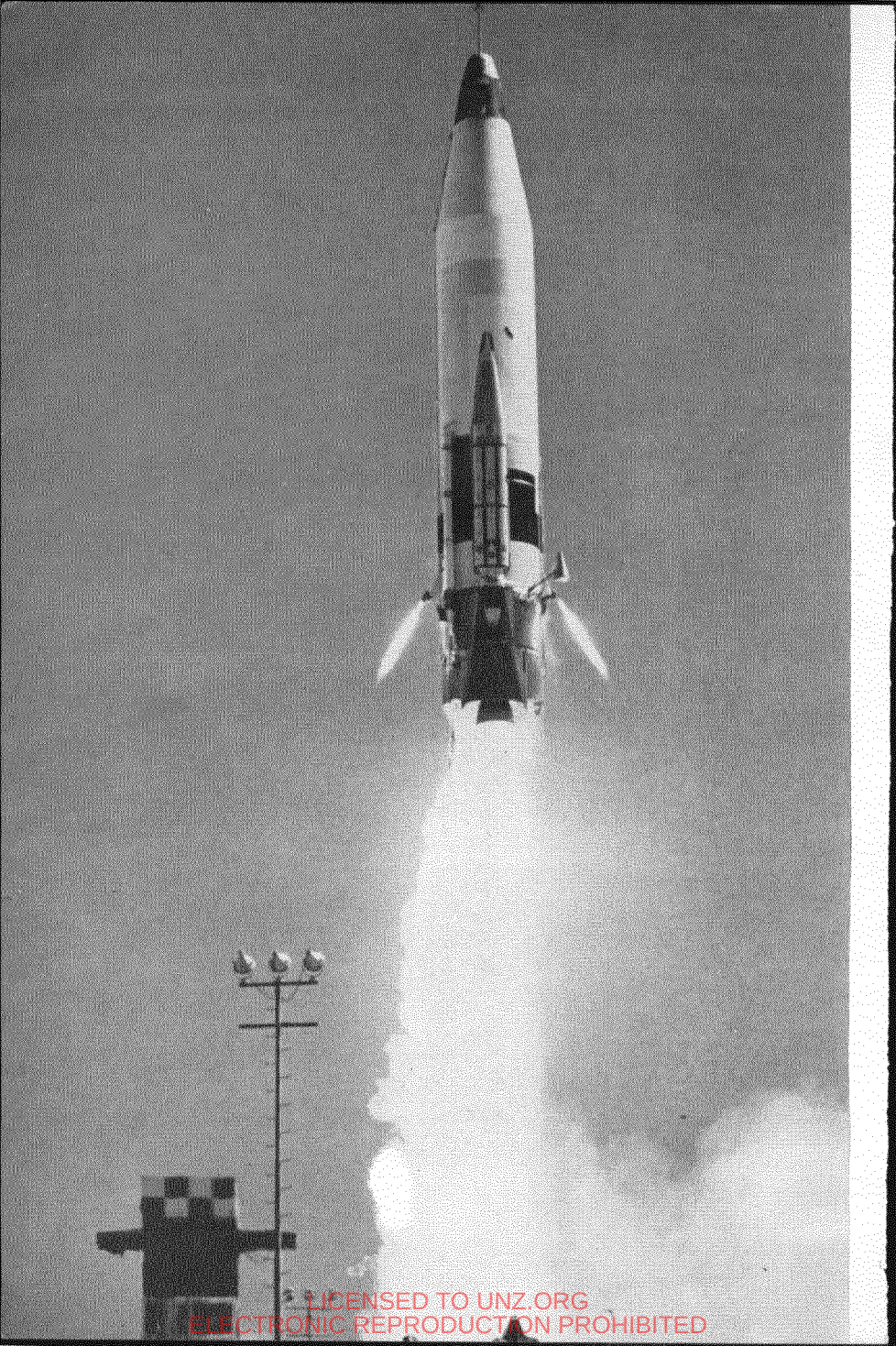
Page 94: The Thor IRBM. Used many techniques of Vanguard and Redstone. More closely descended from Redstone. Gross weight: 55 tons. Thrust: 150,000 pounds. Range: 1500 miles.

U.S. Air Force Photo

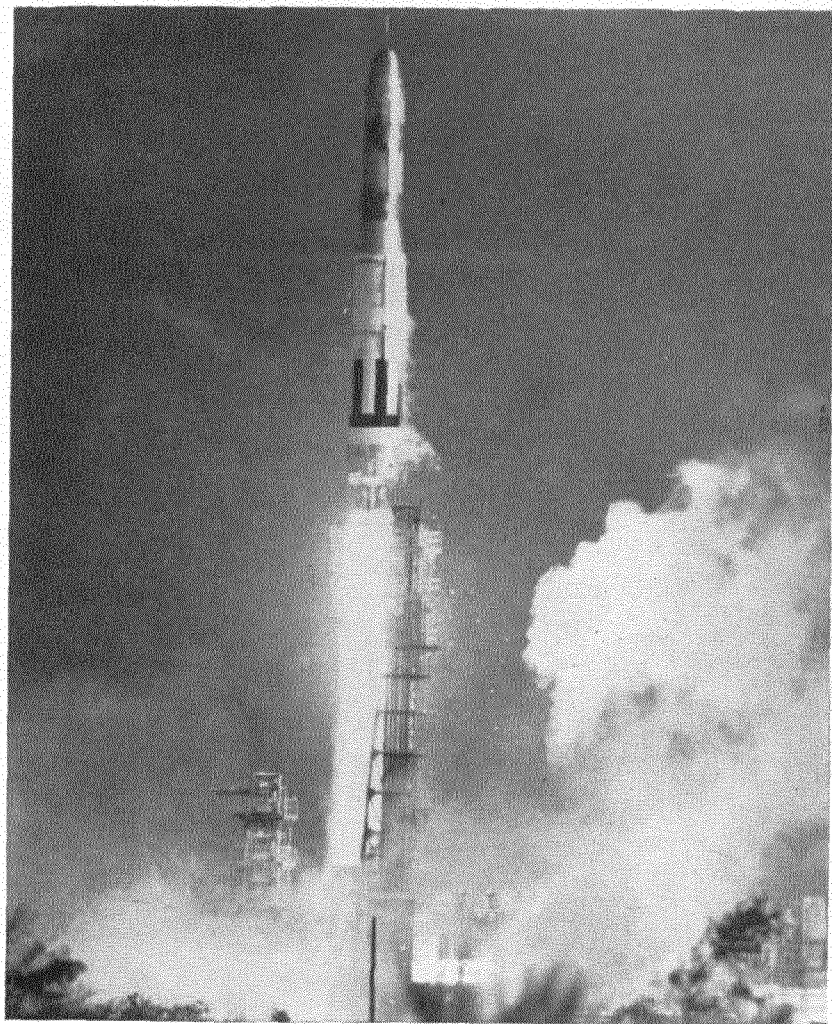
Below: Thor-Able. Combination of Thor IRBM and second stage of Vanguard.

U.S. Air Force Photo





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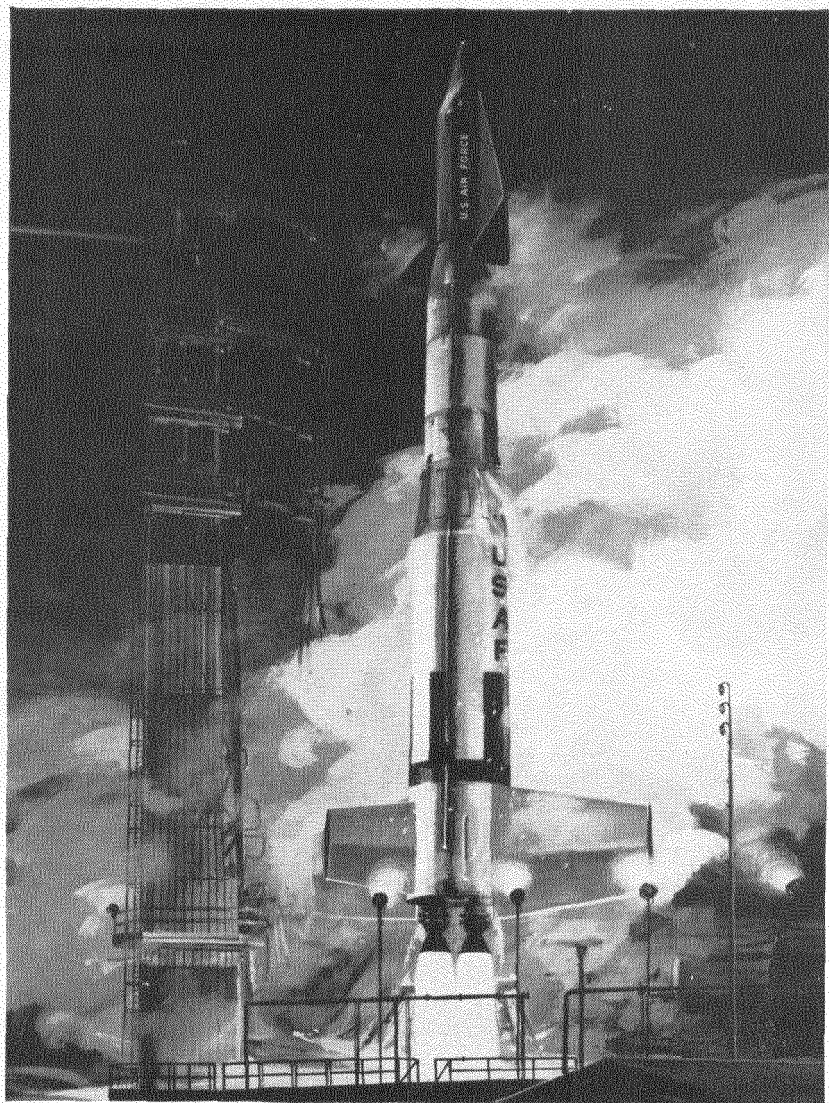
Titan ICBM. True two-staged vehicle. Gross weight 110 tons. Thrust: 300,000 pounds lower stage, 80,000 pounds upper stage. Range: more than 5,500 miles.

Page 96: The *Atlas* ICBM. Parallel-staged; blast off with all engines operating and drops booster engines at staging point. Gross weight: 130 tons. Thrust: 390,000 pounds. Range: 5,500 miles.

Convair/Astronautics

PROGRESS REPORT: SUPER V-2 PROGRAM

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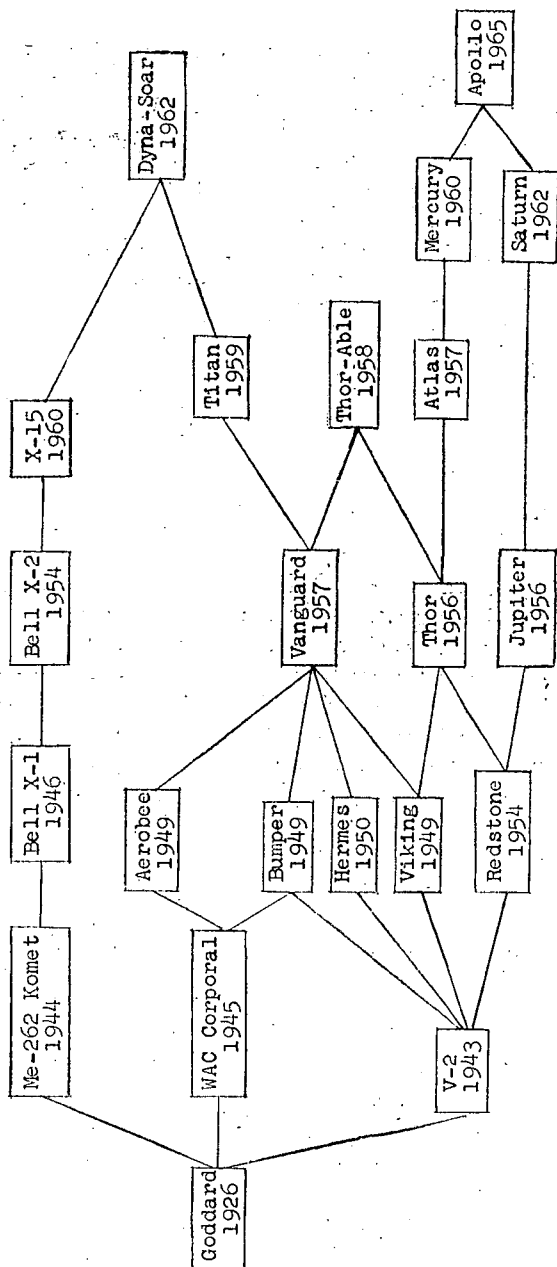


Boeing Airplane Company Photo

The Dyna-Soar space vehicle. Consists of a Titan ICBM booster with fins, Titan second stage, and winged re-entry glider. Orbital with single man.

THE FAMILY TREE OF SPACE VEHICLES

Liquid propellant
(Major vehicles only)



THE END

THE OUTBREAK...



IT WAS a great pity, Space Marshal Wilbur Hennings reflected, as he gazed through the one-way glass of the balcony door, that the local citizens had insisted upon decorating the square before their capitol with the hulk of the first spaceship ever to have landed on Pollux V.

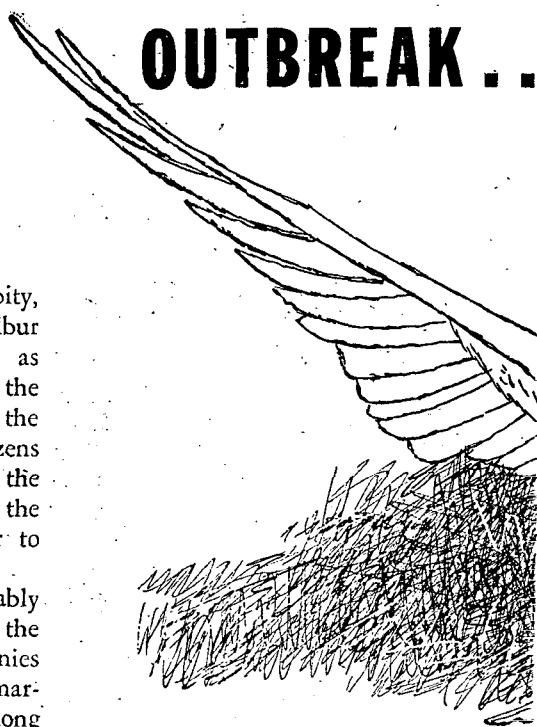
A hundred and fifty years probably seemed impressive to them, amid the explosive spread of Terran colonies and federations. Actually, in the marshal's opinion, it was merely long enough to reveal such symbols as more than antiquated but less than historically precious.

"I presume you plan to have me march past that heap!" he complained, tugging at the extremely "historical" sword that completed the effect of his dazzling white and gold uniform.

Commodore Miller, his aide, stif-

fened nervously.

"Around to the right of it, sir," he gestured. "As you see, the local military are already keeping the route clear of onlookers. We thought it would be most impressive if your party were to descend the outer stairway from the palace balcony here . . . to heighten the importance of—"



..... PEACE



By H. B. FYFE

When properly conducted, a diplomatic mission can turn the most smashing of battle-successes into a fabulous Pyrrhic victory.

Illustrated by van Dongen

"To draw out the pomp and circumstance of opening the conference?"

"Well, sir . . . and then across the square to the conference hall of the capitol, outside which you will pause for a few gracious words to the crowd—"

"And that will probably be my last opportunity to enjoy the morning sunlight. Oh, well, it seems much too bright here in any case."

The commodore absently reached out to adjust a fold of his chief's sky-blue sash, and the marshal as absently parried the gesture.

"I shall be hardly less than half an hour crossing the square," he predicted sourly. "With the cheering throngs they have undoubtedly arranged, and the sunlight reflecting from all that imitation marble, it will be no place to collect one's thoughts."

He turned back to the huge chamber constituting the "office" of the suite supplied by his Polluxian hosts. The skeleton staff of men and women remaining occupied chairs and benches along only one wall, since the bulk of the delegation had been sent out to make themselves popular with the local populace.

Hennings presumed the bulk of the local populace to consist of Polluxians assigned to making themselves popular with his Ursan Federation delegation. His people would be listening politely to myriad reasons why the Polluxians had a natural right to occupy all the star systems from here to Castor, a dozen

light-years farther from Terra. No one would mention the true motive—their illogical choice in naming themselves the Twin Empire.

"Well, now!" he said crisply. "Once more over the main points of the situation! No, commodore, not the schedule of experts that will accompany me to the table; I rely upon you to have perfected that. But have there been any unforeseen developments in the actual fighting?"

A cluster of aides, mostly in uniform but including a few in discreetly elegant civilian attire, moved forward. Each was somehow followed within arm's reach by an aide of his own, so that the advance presented overtones of a small sortie.

Hennings nodded to the first, a youngish man whose air suggested technical competence more than the assurance of great authority. The officer placed his brief case upon the glistening surface of a large table and touched a switch on the flap.

"It's as well to be sure, sir," the commodore approved. "Our men have been unable to detect any devices, but the walls may have ears."

"They won't scan through this scrambler, sir," asserted the young officer.

Hennings accepted a seat at the table and looked to one of the others.

"Mirelli's Star," an older officer reported briskly. "The same situation prevails, with both sides having landed surface troops in force on Mirelli II, Mirelli III, and Mirelli V, the fourth planet being inhabited

by a partly civilized, nonhuman race protected under the Terran Convention."

"Recent engagements?"

"No, sir. Maneuvering continues, but actual encounters have declined in frequency. Casualties are modest and evenly matched. General Nilssen on Mirelli III continues to receive Polluxian agents seeking his defection."

"I never thought to ask," murmured Hennings. "Is he really a distant connection of the Polluxian Nilssen family?"

"It is improbable, sir, but they are polite enough to accept the pretense. Of course, he rejects every offer in a very high-minded manner, and seems to be making an adequate impression of chivalry."

He stepped back at Hennings' nod, to be replaced by another officer.

"One minor space skirmish in the Agohki system to report, sir. The admiral in command appears to have recouped after the error of two days ago, when that Polluxian detachment was so badly mauled. He arranged the capture of three of our cruisers."

"Was that not a trifle rash?" demanded Hennings.

"Intelligence is inclined to think not, sir. The ships were armed only with weapons listed as general knowledge items. The crews were not only trained in prisoner-of-war tactics, but also well supplied with small luxuries. The Polluxian fleet in that system is known to have been in space for several months, so a friendly effect is anticipated."

Hennings considered the condensed report proffered for his perusal. He noted that the Polluxians had been quite gentlemanly about notifying Ursan headquarters of the capture and of the complete lack of casualties. He also saw that while the message was ostensibly directed to the Federation flagship, it had been beamed in such fashion as to be conveniently intercepted at the secret Ursan Federation headquarters on Agohki VII.

"That was a bit rude of them," he commented. "We have never dragged their secrets into the open."

"On the other hand, sir," the commodore suggested, "it may be an almost sophisticated method of permitting us to enjoy our superior finesse."

"I am just as pleased to have the reminder," said Hennings. "It will serve to alert us all the more when we sit down with them over there."

An elegant civilian, a large man with patient, drooping features, stated that nothing had occurred to change the economic situation. Another reported that unofficial channels of information were holding up as well as could be expected. A uniformed officer summarized the battle situation in two more star systems.

"Those are positions we actually desire to hold, are they not?" Hennings asked. "Is action to be taken there?"

"Plans call for local civilian riots at the height of the conference, sir."

"But . . . can we lay no groundwork sooner than that? Sometime in

the foreseeable future, at least! Take it up with Propaganda, Blauvelt! It seems to me that the briefing mentioned an indigenous race on one of these planets—"

Blauvelt dropped his eyes momentarily, equivalent in that gathering to a blush of intense embarrassment. Hennings coughed apologetically.

"Well, now, I should not pry into arrangements I must later be able to deny convincingly with a clear conscience. I can only plead, my dear Blauvelt, the tenseness of the past several days."

The officer murmured inaudibly, fumbled with his papers, and edged to the rear rank. Someone, at Commodore Miller's fluttering, obtained a vacuum jug of ice water and a glass for the marshal, but Hennings chose instead to produce a long cigar from a pocket concealed beneath his resplendent collection of medals.

"My apologies to all of you," he said thoughtfully. "I fear that any of you who may expect contact with the local population had better see Dr. Ibn Talal about the hypnosis necessary to counteract my little indiscretion. And now—what remains?"

"Nothing but the prisoner exchange, sir," Commodore Miller announced after collecting the eyes of the principal officers.

Hennings got his cigar going. He listened to confirmation of a previous report that a massive exchange of "sick and wounded" prisoners had been accomplished, and learned that the Ursans now suspected that they

had accepted unknowingly about as many secret agents as they had sent the Polluxians.

"Oh, well!" he sighed. "As long as the amenities were preserved! We must be as friendly as possible about that sort of thing, or run the risk of antagonizing them."

Seeing that the commodore was tense with impatience, the marshal rose to his feet. An aide deftly received the cigar for disposal, and the party drifted expectantly toward the balcony doors.

From among that part of the staff which would remain to man headquarters, an officer was dispatched to alert the Polluxian honor guard.

One more touch before the die is cast, thought the marshal, as two young officers opened the balcony doors to admit the blare of trumpets.

Cheers rolled successively across the square, rising like distant waves from somewhere beneath the gigantic banner that draped the capitol opposite with fiery letters spelling out "PEACE CONFERENCE."

With a dramatic gesture, Hennings held up the sheaf of reports they had just reviewed. Smiles disappeared in response to his own serious mien.

"So much for the hostilities!" he snapped. He tossed the reports to the officer who would remain in charge. "*Now for the actual war!*"

Pivoting on his heel, he led them smartly out to the ornate balcony stairway that curved down into the sea of cheering Polluxians.

THE END

THE



GHOST FLEET

By **CHRISTOPHER ANVIL**

Sometimes a thing is so old it's brand-new . . .

Illustrated by Douglas



COLONEL William Beller kept a tight rein on his emotions as he waited in the General's anteroom. The General's feelings toward him were plainly shown by the fact that Beller had waited in this anteroom for two-and-a-half hours while men of lesser rank came and went freely.

Beller became aware that the sergeant at the desk was, for the third time, looking him over coldly. Beller had ignored this twice, out of deference to the ribbons on the sergeant's chest. But now he turned to look the sergeant flatly in the eyes.

For a brief instant, it seemed that a message flowed back and forth between them.

The sergeant's eyes said, "You . . . you're the chicken-livered, yellow-bellied, dirt-eater that turned and ran at Little Orion. You lost us a cluster of stars we'll never take back."

The answering message of Beller's eyes was simpler: "When I command, you obey. It has to be. Right, wrong or indifferent, when I command, you obey."

After a moment of the unequal contest, the sergeant looked away. A faint expression of puzzlement crossed his face, then he shrugged slightly, and leaned forward as the intercom buzzed.

A small voice reached Beller, which showed that the General in the other room had not bothered to snap up the quiet-switch. "Send Beller in," said the General's voice.

The sergeant glanced at Beller and said, "You can go in now."

Beller looked at the sergeant, and with single-minded concentration willed him to complete the sentence. Save to turn his head slightly, Beller didn't move.

" . . . Sir," said the sergeant unwillingly.

Beller got up, walked through the open door, and down a short hall, to pause at the door of the inner office.

The General, a former classmate and close friend of Beller's, watched him coldly as Beller paused at the doorway. Then the General nodded slightly. Beller stepped in, saluted and formally reported his presence. The General returned the salute, then looked Beller over as if studying him for unpolished shoes and flecks of dust on his trouser legs. Beller stood at attention, waiting, his gaze fixed on the wall above the General's head.

At length, the General said, "I don't suppose there would be any point in asking questions."

Beller said evenly, "Questions about what, sir?" He knew perfectly well what the General meant. But if the General would not state the question plainly, Beller would not answer it.

The General said, slowly and distinctly, "It is generally considered that you lost your nerve at Little Orion."

"Is it?" said Beller, keeping his voice toneless and his eyes fixed on the wall.

The General leaned back, and put his hands behind his head, studying Beller curiously. "I thought you might have something to say."

Beller said flatly, "You have my report, sir."

The General sat up and snorted. "A new weapon used by the enemy. Your ships being destroyed before the enemy came in range. Every green lieutenant thinks the same thing."

"The difference, sir," said Beller coolly, "is that I am not a green lieutenant."

"That's the obvious point," said the General. "You are supposed to know better."

"I am supposed to use my judgment, sir," said Beller. "And if I decide that it is best to retreat, I will so order."

"Regardless of the cost, eh?"

"To have stayed where I was would have cost my command; for no purpose. That would have been simple plain stupidity."

"And you prefer cowardice to stupidity?"

For the first time, Beller lowered his gaze to look hard into the General's eyes. "Do you call me a coward, sir?"

Once again, a series of messages seemed to flow back and forth. At last, the General shook his head, leaned back, and made a gesture of disgust. "No, I don't call you a coward, Beller. But if you aren't, you must be a fool."

"You're entitled to your opinion, sir."

The General looked irritated. "Don't be so damned stiff. You know you're going to end up in a general court-martial. Is that going to be your defense—that the enemy had a secret weapon?"

"My defense," said Beller coldly, "is something I haven't thought about. But I will tell the truth, and the truth is that my ships were being destroyed beyond effective range of my own or known enemy weapons. My command was perfectly useless in this situation, and I withdrew to save it."

"And lost us the whole star cluster."

"Would you prefer to have lost the star cluster plus the defending fleet?"

The General waved a hand beside his face, as if to brush away gathering confusion. He leaned forward and said harshly, "In a month, Beller, you may be dead. Shot by a firing squad for cowardice. You'll die with your insignia of rank ripped off. You'll have been provided with a ceremonial sword, which will have been snapped in half, as the troops stand by with rifles reversed—"

Beller suddenly could contain himself no longer. He whirled, shut the door to the hall, and snapped the lock. In an instant, he was back at the desk, and pinned the General's hand to the desktop as it reached for the intercom. "You fool," said Beller, his voice intense but hardly louder than a whisper, "do you think if you put stars on the shoulders of a

jackass, it will make him fit to command a fleet?"

The General's face changed color, but when he spoke, there was only a desperate urgency in his voice, which was also hardly more than a whisper. "You ran. You turned tail and ran."

"Of course I ran. You'd run too with a bear half-a-jump behind you and no gun in sight. Can you think of a better thing to do?"

"You lost us the cluster."

"And saved us the fleet. Try and get it through your thick skull that there *was* a new weapon used. Where do you get the idea it's impossible? Don't you know this whole war is a war of weapons?"

"You got excited—"

"Hogwash. Do you think you can judge a thing like that better than I can? We know each other. Did you ever beat me at chess? Did you ever outrun me? Are you a better pistol shot? In that field problem, the last year at school—"

The General grinned suddenly and pulled his hand loose. "Spare me," he said. He started to laugh, then choked it off. "All the same," he said, "you're in one hell of a spot."

"So will we all be when they get that thing in general use."

"I've got the technical boys working on it." The General scowled. "When I read your report, it seemed . . . I don't know . . . familiar."

"It was unfamiliar to me."

The General shrugged. "Well, they'll find it if there's anything to it." He scowled. "But, meanwhile, we've got you to think of."

Beller straightened up and shrugged. "If they want to court-martial me, they'll court-martial me."

"The only reason they haven't already is that they haven't been able to get enough rank together. You realize, they're going to make an example of you."

"If they'd open their minds and listen to me, it would save them a great deal of trouble."

"They won't." The General frowned. "I wouldn't myself, but I know you. The trouble is, this thing fits a standard pattern."

Beller shrugged, "If they shoot me, I'll be no deader than I was bound to be sooner or later anyway. But if they go through that mumbo jumbo with the ceremonial sword and rifles upside-down, they'd better not show it live on 3-V. Have them film it. I'm not sure I can keep from laughing."

The General shook his head. "You've been out of school all these years, and what have you learned? Don't you know raw ability will never take you to the top?"

"I'd rather be myself than be at the top," said Beller. "I like to know what I think when I go to bed at night."

"With a little more tact, you *could* be on top. Then you could do what you want. Let the others change their opinions to suit you."

Beller shook his head. "We've been all over this before. I don't say the system's wrong, or that all considered, it could be done better another way. I don't know. But it seems to me that there are certain solid re-

alities, and the rest is window-dressing. The window-dressing changes, but the reality remains. I want to stick by the reality."

The General nodded. He leaned back, and a look of calculation crossed his face. He got up, and opened a file drawer. "Some of this stuff is silly," he growled, "but it's all almost too secret even to think about. Ah, here we are." He pulled out a bulky folder, sat down, and leafed through it.

Beller stood with feet apart, and hands clasped behind his back, waiting.

The General cleared his throat and leaned forward. "How would you like a suicide mission?"

Beller grinned. The General had spoken as if he were offering a present.

Realizing this, the General said, "I don't mean that quite the way it sounds. In the court-martial, you won't stand a chance. But if you go out on this mission and come back alive, they won't be able to touch you. The charge is cowardice, and they'll have had it stuffed back down their throats. This is a very dangerous mission. Dangerous enough to be *called* a suicide mission. But in a thing like this, there's nearly always *some* chance. A lot more than in the court-martial."

"Can you send me on it? I haven't been able to make out whether I'm under arrest or not."

The General nodded. "I can send you on it. We're short of men who

could do this job, and you're qualified. I can send you on it and wave priorities and classified documents in their faces, and refer to Plan X, and they'll be only too glad to drop the whole thing." He added shrewdly, "There are advantages to understanding human nature."

Beller smiled and nodded. "What's the mission?"

"Well," said the General, watching Beller's face as if nervous about his possible reaction. "Our big trouble right now, you know, is a double one. We're short of ships, for one thing. Since Hauser took over, we've straightened out the imbecilic distribution of forces we had before. But we're still suffering from past losses, and the production program hasn't caught up yet. Then there's this chronic trouble about fuel for the drive-units. We've *got* to have quadrite for combat ships. But the sources we have to rely on are awkwardly situated. For instance, there's the third planet of Ostrago—a place called Knackruth—that supplies us with a great deal of quadrite. We can't afford to lose that source. If we lose it, we'll have to tranship quadrite from halfway across the system. A few months back, Bannister put up a finish fight to stop an Out advance that would have cut off Knackruth. He stopped it. But they wore him so thin in the process that he'll never stop them a second time."

Beller nodded. "Now they're getting ready to try again?"

"We have every reason to think so. They know now there's something

valuable to us close at hand, otherwise we'd have been more flexible. What we expect is that they'll go on the defensive elsewhere, switch their heavy forces opposite Knackruth, and smash through Bannister like a rock through tissue paper."

Beller nodded, waiting:

"Ordinarily," said the General, "we'd wait till we thought they had their arrangements about two thirds ready, then we'd hit them hard in another sector, fall back where they advanced, and try to get in behind their main attack. But we can't do that now. We can't afford to lose Knackruth. We don't have the strength for a serious attack. We have to try a hoax."

The General glanced at Beller uneasily, looked down for a moment at the folder from the file, stiffened his jaw, and said, "The name of this plan is 'Operation Ghost.' The force to be used consists of three fleets, each consisting of twelve simulated Class-A battleships, forty simulated Class-A and 1A cruisers, and one hundred and twenty-six simulated smaller ships. Your flagship will be an R-Class dreadnought—unsimulated, with new communications and detector equipment."

Beller winced. Mentally he groped back through remembered lists of specifications. "R-Class" . . . how far back in antiquity was that? He grinned suddenly.

The General, watching his face, relaxed a little. "Your mission is to attack the main enemy force head-on.

You will move through Bannister's defensive screen as if you intended to crush the Out attacking force by the sheer power of numbers. If they break through Bannister before you get there, you're free to follow whatever course you choose. The main thing is to act like a man with half a thousand ships at his back."

"You figure if I tried a feint attack elsewhere, this simulated fleet could never make it through their defenses?"

The General nodded. "Ordinarily we'd spare you enough real ships to get through their outer shell, but we can't afford it now. What we hope to do is to disjoint their forces opposite Knackruth. When they see this fleet coming, they'll start multiplying their defenses. They'll pull back their own main forces, either to back up their defenses or to attack elsewhere in the hope of throwing us off-balance. In either case, they'll scream for help from other sectors, and that will mean a great many of their ships pulled out of action all around the perimeter.

Beller nodded, then said thoughtfully, "How do we know this hoax will fool them? What if they just decide we couldn't spare such a force, and therefore it can't be real?"

"You have to consider their frame of mind. We know now that they operated for many years with a saboteur planted in our capital. We know that they have extraordinary powers of mental suggestion. For years, they got by with this, because we ordinarily just won't believe such a

thing is possible. The last messages out of the capital show that during a change of administration the new Defense Secretary uncovered the whole thing. Before the saboteur could get to him, the Secretary brought down Hauser and the general reserve and blew the capital to bits.

"Once a new team took over at the auxiliary capital, it dawned on them that all our arrangements were wrong. Defenses were rigid and badly organized. Warship design was antiquated. Supplies were routed so as to take the longest possible time in shipment. Contracts were let to the most inefficient contractors. The worst available equipment was procured, with incessant halts in production to change this or that insignificant detail. The whole thing was a mess.

"In spite of this," said the General, "they hadn't beaten us. We had a terrible time in their next attack, but before it was over we hit them so hard they were glad to get out with a whole skin. Since then, they can't predict us. We've made the most of our remaining resources, and if they have any sense at all, they know what's being gotten ready for them. If it comes out at them five months before they expected it, that just proves they miscalculated again."

Beller nodded thoughtfully. "It might work, at that."

"It's worth a try," said the General. He added dryly, "Do you wish to volunteer for this assignment?"

Beller and the General smiled at

each other. Then a question occurred to Beller, but he was afraid to ask it:

Where could the General have dug up a crew qualified to run the ancient dreadnought?

Beller boarded the dreadnought carrying a newsheet that had been spat at him out of a printer during breakfast in the lunar commissary. This sheet contained optimistic interpretations of the news from all sectors, plus a number of features and columns. Part of one of these columns had interested Beller personally:

"... And then there's an ugly little item from out Little Orion way. It seems the local brasshat defending a vital cluster lost his nerve when the Outs arrived, turned tail and ran, dragging his fleet behind him. The story has it that he didn't stop till he reached Aux Cap and had the general reserve to hide behind, and then he let out a yell that the enemy had a secret weapon. Their only weapon is ordinary courage, but it took this brasshat by surprise.

"Cowardice is an ugly word. It's an ugly charge to brand a man with. But we'll brand this man with it, gladly. He's already branded himself. With the future of the race hanging in peril, the only treatment for this sort of rat is the firing squad or the rope, and we'll keep right after the Space Force till they give it to him. We'll have more details on this later ...

"Now a note for you showbirds. Sheila Wister, who performed so

beautifully in 'Sellout' is back again—"

Beller shut the lock of the little courier boat behind him, and stepped away as the hydraulic lifts raised and slid the boat sidewise to lock it tight in its cradle.

He glanced around, puzzled by the general atmosphere of the ship. Everything seemed in unusually good order. That the air purifiers were functioning perfectly was evident from the forestlike freshness of the air. Deck and bulkheads were neatly painted, with no sign of rust anywhere. The brass handle of the inner air-lock hatch was polished and coated with a protective film. Beside the hatch stood a very elderly man in the uniform of a major of the Space Force Reserve. He saluted stiffly, and Beller returned the salute.

"Bovak, sir," said the major, in a rusty voice. "I'm your executive officer."

Beller said, "Glad to meet you, major." He glanced around at the excellent condition of what he had seen so far, scowled and cleared his throat. "Could you tell me where this ship has been kept? I wasn't aware we had any of this class in reserve."

"We didn't, sir," said Bovak dryly. "This ship was Exhibit C in the Arts and Sciences Museum on Landor II. Across the fairgrounds in the crystal dome back of the pool."

Beller felt as if a case of ammunition had been dropped on him. The major, who had looked elderly before, suddenly appeared two-hundred years old to Beller. He didn't like to

say what he said next, but he had to know how things stood.

"And you, Major?" said Beller gently.

"I, sir, was chief of the maintenance crew that cared for the ship." The major said it with pride. "My crew, sir, is now your crew."

"Ah," said Beller, trying to appear appreciative. It dawned on him that he was going into space against the Outs in a museum exhibit manned by janitors, with a dummy fleet behind him, while he himself was a pariah on temporary leave from a general court-martial. "Operation Ghost" was well-named.

"Well," said Beller, "let's look the ship over."

"Yes, sir," said Bovak.

The tour of inspection showed Beller the massive lines on which the ship was built, along with the excellent condition in which it had been kept. At intervals, he was introduced to an elderly reserve captain or lieutenant, who turned out to be his gunnery officer or drive-unit engineer. There was not an enlisted man on board. It was only after he'd reached the control room that it occurred to Beller to wonder if these ranks were real or simulated. He had forgotten that he himself had been made—for the purpose of commanding the simulated fleet—a simulated lieutenant-general.

Well, there was nothing to do now but hope and pray.

He turned to the eighty-five-year-old pilot, and said "Let's go, captain."

The pilot smiled faintly, and reached out past a little placard reading: "Control Board: At this panel are grouped the master controls for flying and fighting the ship. Many of the secondary controls are completely automatic.—Exhibit C, *Science and Industry*."

There was a very faint vibration as the giant engines came to life. Lights winked on the instrument panel in a fashion strange to Beller.

The museum piece turned its nose in the direction of the enemy and began to move.

The days fled past as the huge insubstantial fleet hurtled toward



Knackruth, the quadrite-rich planet of the sun Ostrago. The fleet was halfway there when word came through that Bannister, blocking the way to Knackruth, was under heavy attack. A little later, Bannister himself was on the screen. Beller knew that all Bannister had been told was that a "force of considerable size" was approaching, and would attempt to pass out through his defenses on a certain day.

On the screen, Bannister eyed Beller's uniform, and his eyes widened. A lieutenant-general ordinarily commanded very considerable forces.

"Sir," said Bannister, "I'm sorry to trouble you, but my orders said I might get in touch with you if necessary. I'm under heavy attack here, and I don't think I can hold." He added sharply, "I'll do my best. But I'd be a liar if I said anything else."

Beller nodded. "What do the Outs have?"

"Counting only large ships, there's a dozen battleships, and eight big cruisers. They have smaller ships in proportion." Bannister hesitated, then said, "I can't hold them. I've tried everything I can think of, and they've just got too much of everything."

Beller nodded coolly.

Bannister's eyes moved slightly back and forth, searching Beller's face and noting the total lack of surprise or excitement. Suddenly Bannister looked at Beller's insignia again, glanced at what few details of the ship could be seen through the

short-focus screen, and said, "I don't mean to presume, sir . . . but if you will forgive my asking . . . what force do *you* have, sir?"

Beller had been afraid of this. The latest information, however, was that the enemy was intercepting just such conversations as this. Beller reminded himself to act like a man with "half-a thousand ships at his back."

He scowled, and said coolly, "As a matter of fact, Bannister, you *do* presume. But I know you've been under a great deal of strain lately."

"Yes, sir," said Bannister stiffly. "Sorry, sir."

"Therefore," said Beller, "I will freely forgive you."

"Thank you, sir," Bannister squinted at him curiously. "I asked, sir, so that I might know whether to place my remnants under your command as we pull back."

"I wasn't intending to pull back."

Bannister blinked. He opened his mouth, and hesitated.

Beller said, "As a matter of fact, I doubt that this will make any change in our plans whatever."

"But, sir . . . twelve battleships and eighty cruisers . . . plus auxiliaries—"

"They make no more difference to me than one battleship and half-a-dozen cruisers." This, Beller thought, was literally true. One properly handled cruiser could blow up the whole fleet, with the possible exception of the dreadnought. But Bannister plainly put a different interpretation on it.

"Sir, you don't mean—"

"I mean nothing. However, Bovak —" Beller turned to his executive officer, out of reach of the screen. "Take a detector sweep of the first division and transmit it to General Bannister."

"Yes, sir," rasped Bovak, reaching for the coupling switches.

Bannister blinked, and turned from the screen. A muffled exclamation burst from him as the traces appeared on his auxiliary screen. He whirled to stare at Beller, who said dryly, "Sweep the second division, Bovak."

"Yes, sir."

Bannister returned to the screen. "We'll chop them to mincemeat. They've got some kind of funny weapon, and we may have to look out for it, sir. But they can't stand up to this."

Beller felt like a traitor, but he smiled and said, "We'll do our best."

Bannister, obviously lifted into a state of exaltation, saluted with glowing eyes.

Beller returned the salute, and the screen blanked.

The ghost fleet swept on.

They were a little beyond Ostrago when the first trace of the enemy fleet showed up on the long-range detectors. Seriously cut up, Bannister was still hanging onto a sun-system at their flank and rear, hoping to hit the enemy remnants as they fled.

Beller said, "Form plane on axis of attack."

Bovak, doubling as Beller's division commanders, manipulated three lev-

ers on a control box. The dummy ships, their large light volume driven by light engines, moved slowly apart, like a giant metal flower blossoming from its bud.

Immediately the enemy traces on the long-range detector screen did the same.

The two fleets opened up, forming giant lattices only one layer thick. In this position, each ship would be best situated to bring its maximum power to bear on the enemy.

The two fleets continued to open up, each trying to reach out further than the other, lest the other be able to send an unopposed detachment forward to curl over the thin edge of the opposing formation and withdraw it with an overpowering concentration of fire.

Now, Beller saw, the distant Out fleet had reached its utmost extension, and was adjusting the positions of its ships to best advantage.

The ghost fleet, however, continued to open up.

Watching the symbolic representation of the positions develop on the battle screen, Beller was amazed that the enemy fleet refused to pull back or slow its pace. The two fleets had fallen into a perfectly standard pattern, which, if the ships of each had been equal, would have meant the total ruin of the enemy. Of course, there was still time. It could be that the enemy commander was trying a test of wills.

The communicator buzzed, and Beller snapped it on. Bannister, looking fatigued and utterly hopeless,

was watching him sorrowfully. "I've had a chance to evaluate all my battle reports, sir."

Beller nodded.

"Sir," said Bannister, "there's no doubt of it. We've had chance reports before and now there's proof. The enemy's using a secret weapon."

Beller nodded dryly. "There *have* been reports of a new weapon."

"Well, the reports are true. This Out fleet hardly had to really exert itself to finish us. But they're being clever. They mask the effect. All the same, this thing, whatever it is, just touches the ship, and—blooey—it blows apart."

"What do you mean 'touches'?"

"I don't know, sir. Let's say, they merely aim it. It operates beyond our effective range. They merely aim this thing, pull the trigger, and by what process I don't know, we're finished. The ship blows apart."

"How is it, then, that any of your force is left?"

"I'm small fish. If they slaughtered me, you'd withdraw. To fool us, they only mauled me, and used the weapon at less than maximum range, and they used it cleverly. When an ultra-fast missile was just starting out from one of our ships, they'd hit the missile. The explosion of the missile would wreck the ship, and we'd take it for a strike by one of their missiles. But on correlation of all the data, we find that we were destroyed by something that set off our own weapons, save for one or two cases where we got too close, and they used the thing direct."

"Hm-m-m," said Beller, nodding. "You'll report this as soon as possible."

Bannister's eyes widened. "Yes, sir. But I assumed you'd pull back."

Beller nodded. Unfortunately, he was counted on to create a diversion. If he pulled back, he would have slowed the Out fleet by only the delay it cost them to maul Bannister rather than evaporate him. He couldn't split his ghost fleet into fragments moving in all directions to confuse pursuit, because the whole thing was centrally controlled from the dreadnought. Any maneuver that merely delayed contact would provide that much more time for the enemy fleet to discover the nature of the hoax. However, Beller thought, there was still the possibility that the enemy might intercept this conversation. Cause for future hesitation and uneasiness might still be given them.

Beller said, "There have been rumors of a new weapon. Now we'll test it and see."

Bannister blinked. "But . . . sir . . . they'll destroy the fleet."

"That may be. But, believe me, Bannister, when I say that this fleet represents a very minor fraction of the production power that is now coming into play. We'll see what this new weapon can do. And then we'll see what hits them when they get in a little farther."

Bannister swallowed. His expression wavered between dread and hope. Finally, he said "Yes, sir," and saluted. The screen blanked.

The battle screen showed Beller that the ghost fleet had now reached its fullest extension. As the two fleets began to close, Beller said: "Increase acceleration to fleet maximum."

"Yes, sir," said Bovak.

The battle screen showed the two fleets, rushing together.

They were still beyond the ordinary maximum range when Bovak said, "Strike. Battleship in the first division. Strike—Second division 1A-cruiser. Strike. Three A-cruisers, third division. Battleship, second division. Cruiser, first division. Three cruisers, second division—"

Beller watched the battle screen, where the symbols winked out like checkers picked up and tossed off the board in mid-play. This was what Beller had experienced at Little Orion, save that here there was nothing to gain by withdrawal. As he watched, great holes began to appear in the ghost fleet.

Somewhere in the rear of the old dreadnought, there was a warbling sound that rose, and died away.

Beller glanced at Bovak, who looked blank. Bovak had given up relating the losses, as it was impossible to keep up with them. Almost a third of the fleet was gone.

Beller said, "Decrease acceleration of the center."

On the battle screen, the outermost ships began to draw ahead, as if to overlap the edge of the enemy formation. This bid vanished along with the outermost ships.

The ships were not yet in range, but Beller thought it unnatural for a fleet in this position not to try something, however disorganized.

"Dreadnought hold fire. Fire all weapons on simulated ships only."

In the rear of the dreadnought, the warbling began again. It rose to a peak, then died away again.

On the battle screen, the lines reached out, as the ghost fleet fired its scatter of puny weapons. Beller felt gratified. This had the look of discipline breaking down, with here and there a controller losing his nerve and letting off a weapon at hopeless range.

The warble started up again, low this time, and died away.

Now two-thirds of the fleet was gone. Only now were they starting to come into range.

The warbling began, died away, rose, died away, rose to a peak of twanging that seemed to vibrate the whole ship, died away, rose again.

Bovak was talking to the engine room. He glanced at Beller, puzzled. "Nothing wrong there, sir. I don't know what makes that noise."

The dreadnought was now alone on the battle screen, coming into conventional range of the enemy fleet. Beller was struck by the situation that had come about. The dreadnought was approaching the enemy fleet like a dart flying at a huge target. At any moment this target might erupt in a concentration of destructive energy that would vaporize the dreadnought in a fraction of a second.

Bovak pulled down a large red

lever. "Controllers, select targets."

The dreadnought was now within maximum range. Nothing happened.

Then dazzling lines reached out from the dreadnought, to converge on an Out battleship. The battleship vanished.

From a different set of batteries, another set of dazzling lines reached out. The controllers, Beller realized, were coolly conserving the ship's energy at this range. He saw the lines converge. Another Out battleship vanished.

Still there was no return fire.

But all around Beller, the twanging was so continuous that it seemed almost solid.

A third Out battleship vanished under the power of the dreadnought's weapons.

Beller, partly dazed by the continuous noise around him, stared at the battle screen. This situation added up to nothing he could understand. Unless—

Beller stepped up beside Bovak, and took another glance at the battle screen. The Out fleet still did nothing but rush on. It retained its formation, extending it slowly as the dreadnought approached. The formation was like a disk with an almost perfect circular rim. Beller said to Bovak, "Fire on the ship in the geometric center of that information."

Beller relayed the order to the controllers.

Again the dazzling lines reached out, to converge on a large cruiser at the center of the enemy formation. The cruiser vanished.

Abruptly, the twanging sound was gone.

The other enemy ships continued on their courses, unaffected, dumbly.

Another Out battleship followed its predecessors.

Beller said, "Cease fire. Decelerate."

Bovak shoved up the red lever.

The two men stared at each other.

The General said wonderingly, "A second ghost fleet?"

Beller nodded. He was back in the office where the General had first unfolded the plan. But the difference between this visit and the last was enormous. Symbolic of the difference was the attitude of the sergeant in the anteroom, who had looked at Beller with something approaching awe.

The story had, of course, been told over the communication web, but the General wanted it first hand.

"So," said the General, smiling, with a look of calculation, "at the end, it was just your ship versus the whole Out fleet?"

"Yes, sir."

"You didn't run. You didn't crab sidewise to get out of there. You didn't scream for help. You just went straight for them, head-on."

"The inertia of the ship, sir," said Beller dryly, "would have thrown me into their lap sidewise or backwards, regardless what I'd tried to do."

"Oh, I know; but I'm thinking how it's going to sound if they go through with that court-martial. Well, then, next you figured the ac-

tion of the Out fleet was peculiar."

"It dawned on me," said Beller, "that they were acting exactly as I had acted a little earlier. Then I remembered Bannister saying that they'd hardly exerted themselves to beat him. Of course, it would seem that way if he was up against dummy ships with only a few real, remote-controlled weapons for deception purposes. Next it dawned on me that the Outs might be stretched to the limit, too. Naturally, they want to finish us before the tide turns too strongly against them—and we've been coming up lately. The obvious place for the control-ship, if this was another ghost fleet, was in or near the center. We blew it up, and the rest just drifted on. It was then that we started to hunt for whatever had made that terrific twanging noise."

Beller handed the General a small placard, such as is used in museums to explain exhibits:

Disrupter Countervail

The disrupter countervail was used during the period of the Early Space Wars to counteract by split-phased resonance the action of the nuclear disrupter. The nuclear disrupter was in this period used to unbalance the binding forces of the atoms, causing a rapid collapse of the structure of the attacked ship. The disrupter, however, required the use of such large and complex equipment, and its action was so easily countered, that it soon fell out of use. For many generations, the countervail was carried on ships as a matter

of routine precaution, though the disrupter itself has seldom ever been used since the early space wars.—Exhibit C, *Science and Industry*.

The General looked up.

"Orders from the capital removed all remaining countervails on the older ships several years ago, to save space and weight. No one raised a question. We'd never had any use for the things. When the trouble you mentioned started, first it fit the standard pattern of . . . excuse me . . . a frightened man making an alibi for himself, and then it looked as if it might possibly fit the standard pattern of a brand-new weapon. It never occurred to us it might be an old weapon revived. We were victimized by too much reliance on standard patterns."

"When you think about it," said Beller, "that's something we're up against all the time, isn't it?"

"How do you mean?"

"We're likely to end up confronted with one solid fact—a real truth—at the center of a huge formation of conjecture, opinion, and all manner of things, dependent on that one central thing that's real. The sheer size and volume of the total may seem overwhelming."

"Yes," said the General, "but if you can avoid being dominated by it, and deal with the real fact—"

Beller nodded.

"Then," he said, "you've got a chance to knock out a Ghost Fleet."

THE END



OCCASION FOR DISASTER

By MARK PHILLIPS

^
Somebody somewhere was wishing all the world "a plague on both your houses," and making it stick. Confusion is fun in a comedy—but in the pilot of a plane or an executive of a nation . . .

Illustrated by van Dongen

KENNETH J. MALONE, FBI Agent extraordinary, has been sent on an enforced vacation by ANDREW J. BURRIS, FBI Director. Malone, at work on a case Burris assigned to him, has apparently completed his work. But Malone doesn't think so.

He began by trying to find out what was causing the errors in Congressional computer-secretaries that were making a shambles of Congressional life. In checking, he discovered that the machines weren't making the errors; the technicians operating them were. And all of them were making about the same number of errors.

FBI Agent THOMAS BOYD was assigned to a similar case, and Malone compared notes with him. It wasn't only Congress that was behaving oddly; labor unions, gangsters and other elements were also going to hell in a handbasket. Malone first considered Russian or Chinese sabotage—but why would anybody want to sabotage the gangsters?

"Why" isn't the only question; there's also "how." Any physical method seemed to involve far too many spies; Malone settled on some psionic method and Boyd, reluctantly, agreed with him. Boyd went off to settle the physical end of things by grilling technicians and Malone had a talk with DR. THOMAS O'CONNOR, the Westinghouse psionics expert, who told him that a psionic force that would act on many men in the same way at the same time is a brand-new idea, and not a very plausible

one. He also mentioned the American Society for Psychical Research and Malone went to see them.

There he met a beautiful redhead named LOU, who got him in to see SIR LEWIS CARTER, President of the Society. Sir Lewis sent him all relevant material, including a book which detailed a sort of "telepathic projection" which sounded just like what Malone was looking for.

Meantime, he's been consulting with QUEEN ELIZABETH I, otherwise known as ROSE THOMPSON. Her Majesty is a sweet little old lady who is unquestionably one hundred percent nutty—but also unquestionably one hundred per cent telepathic. She firmly believes that she is Elizabeth I, and immortal, and has knighted Malone with the muzzle of his .44 Magnum.

Her Majesty tells him that she's been getting disturbing bursts of mental "static" when she's tuned to him—and, at this point, Boyd calls. He's located three spies.

Malone goes to attend the questioning with her Majesty, who stays in the next room so that she can check on the spies' stories. The spies, BRUBITSCH, BORBITSCH and GARBITSCH, are reluctant at first, but then change their minds and talk. Her Majesty tells Malone that, just before this change, each of the spies was subjected to a burst of mental static. The spies now strangely truthful, state that they had nothing to do with the present mixup.

Malone, Boyd and Her Majesty meet to talk things over and agree

that some sort of psionic force is behind what's going on. But in talking about "telepathic projection," Her Majesty states that the technique just isn't possible; she's tried it many times and it's never worked.

Malone draws up a report on progress and presents it to Burris, who is delighted with the capture of the spies, and tells Malone that the case is now completed. Malone is surprised by this news, but Burris tells him that the trouble with the computer-secretaries has now stopped. O'Connor and Her Majesty agree that the force Malone postulates doesn't exist. And, on top of everything else, Burris has had the water-cooler in the computer-secretary room analyzed. It contains a small amount of Haenli-gen's Mixture, one of the new psychodrugs which warps judgment. Burris is sure it's been causing the errors, even though the spies did not admit putting it into the cooler.

He sends Malone on vacation. But Malone isn't satisfied that the case is complete. If the mental static acts to change a person's mind, then why couldn't it have acted to change Burris' mind, to make him think the case was finished?

Malone goes to Las Vegas, checks into the Great Universal Hotel there as Kenneth J. Malone, businessman from Chicago, and from there teleports to Yucca Flats and talks to Her Majesty and the Queen's psychiatrists. The psychiatrist, DR. ALAN MARSHALL, and DR. SHELDON LORD, a psychologist, are in agreement that Her Majesty hasn't gotten

any worse, and is not lying. Malone then sees the Queen, who tells him that she's been getting no thoughts whatever from his mind for the past twenty-four hours.

She tells him that he's causing this blackout, and he learns to control it; apparently his mind has set up a shield against interference, after his thinking about the mental static.

Now he knows that Her Majesty is right about the mental static—and that Burris is wrong. But he can't go back to Burris; there isn't any real evidence in the first place, and in the second place if Burris' mind is being changed it can just as easily be changed again. Malone has to work things out on his own.

His first step is to go out and collect all the newspapers he can find. They tell him that things are in a mess all over—Congress, big business, labor, gangsters and private citizens are all engaged in great gobs of confusion. There's a pattern—but Malone can't quite see what it is.

After spending two weeks at Las Vegas, he's no further on, and his money is running a little low. The country's sliding downhill fast, from all appearances. Malone has an interview with PRIMO-PALVERI, owner of the Great Universal, and Palveri tells him that things are even worse than he'd imagined. Coming out of Palveri's office, Malone bumps into Lou, the girl from the Psychological Research Society, who tells him she's here in Las Vegas on a vacation.

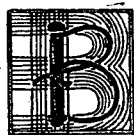
He makes a date with her for later that evening.

Primo Palveri has mentioned that he's lost a recent gun battle over some peyotl buttons to MIKE SAND of the National Brotherhood of Truckers. This means, Malone reasons, that Sand won—and anybody who wins in this confusion is automatically Suspect Number One.

Malone decides to teleport himself to New York to talk to Mike Sand.

PART 4

XI



BACK in his room, Malone put on a fresh shirt, checked the .44 Magnum in his shoulder holster, changed jackets, adjusted his hat to the proper angle, and vanished.

He had, he'd realized, exactly one definite lead. And now he was going to follow up on it. The Government was apparently falling to pieces; so was business and so was the Mafia. Nobody Malone had heard of had gained anything. Except Mike Sand and his truckers. They'd beaten the Mafia, at least.

Sand was worth a chat. Malone had a way to get in to see him, but he had to work fast. Otherwise Sand would very possibly know what Malone was trying to do. And that might easily be dangerous.

He had made his appearance in the darkness beneath one of the bridges at the southwest side of Central Park, in New York. It was hardly Malone's idea of perfect comfort, but

it did mean safety; there was very seldom anyone around after dark, and the shadows were thick enough so that his "appearance" would only mean, to the improbable passerby, that he had stepped out into the light.

Now he strolled quietly over to Central Park West, and flagged a taxi heading downtown. He'd expected to run into one of the roving muggers who still made the Park a trap for the unwary—he'd almost looked forward to it, in a way—but nobody appeared. It was unusual, but he didn't have time to wonder about it.

The headquarters for the National Brotherhood of Truckers was east of Greenwich Village, on First Avenue, so Malone had plenty of time to think things out while the cab wended its laborious southeast way. After a few minutes he realized that he would have even more time to think than he'd planned on.

"Lots of traffic for this time of night," he volunteered.

The cabbie, a fiftyish man with a bald, wrinkled head and surprisingly bright blue eyes, nodded without turning his head. "Maybe you think this is bad," he said. "You would not recognize the place an hour earlier, friend. During the real rush hour, I mean. Things are what they call *meshuggah*, friend. It means crazy."

"How come?" Malone said.

"The subway is on strike since last week," the cabbie said. "The buses are also on strike. This means that everybody is using a car. They can

make it faster if they wish to walk, but they use a car. It does not help matters, believe me."

"I can see that," Malone murmured.

"And the cops are not doing much good either," the cabbie went on, "since they went on strike sometime last Tuesday."

Malone nodded, and then did a double-take. "Cops?" he said. "On strike? But that's illegal. They could be arrested."

"You can be funny," the cabbie said. "I am too sad to be funny."

"But—"

"Unless you are from Rhode Island," the cabbie said, "or even farther away, you are deaf, dumb and blind. Everybody in New York knows what is going on by this time. I admit that it is not in the newspapers, but the newspapers do not tell the truth since, as I remember it, the City Council election of 1924, and then it is an accident, due to the major's best friend working in the printing plants."

"But cops can't go on strike," Malone said plaintively.

"This," the cabbie said in a judicious tone, "is true. But they do not give out any parking tickets any more, or any traffic citations either. They are working on bigger things, they say, and besides all this there are not so many cops on the force now. They are spread very thin."

Malone could see what was coming. "Arrests of policemen," he said, "and resignations."

"And investigations," the cabbie

said. "Mayor Amalfi is a good Joe and does not want anything in the papers until a real strike comes along, but the word gets out anyhow, as it always does."

"Makes driving tough," Malone said.

"People can make better time on their hands and knees," the cabbie said, "with the cops pulling a strike. They concentrate on big items now, and you can even smoke in the subways if you can find a subway that is running."

Malone stopped to think how much of the city's income depended on parking tickets and small fines, and realized that a "strike" like the one the police were pulling might be very effective indeed. And, unlike the participants in the Boston Police Strike of sixty-odd years before, these cops would have public sentiment on their side—since they were keeping actual crime down.

"How long do they think it's going to last?" Malone said.

"It can be over tomorrow," the cabbie said, "but this is not generally believed in the most influential quarters. Mayor Amalfi and the new Commissioner try to straighten things out all day long, but the way things go straightening them out does no good. Something big is in the wind, friend. I—"

The cab, on Second Avenue and Seventeenth Street, stopped for a traffic light. Malone felt an itch in the back of his mind, as if his prescience were trying to warn him of some-

thing; he'd felt it for a little while, he realized, but only now could he pay attention to it.

The door on the driver's side opened suddenly, and so did the door next to Malone. Two young men, obviously in their early twenties, were standing in the openings, holding guns that were plainly intended for immediate use.

The one next to the driver said, in a flat voice: "Don't nobody get wise. That way nobody gets hurt. Give us—"

That was as far as he got.

When the rear door had opened, Malone had had a full second to prepare himself, which was plenty of time. The message from his precognitive powers had come along just in time.

The second gunman thrust his gun into the cab. He seemed almost to be handing it to Malone politely, and this effect was spoiled only by Malone's twist of the gunman's wrist, which must have felt as if he'd put his hand into a loop tied to the axle of a high-speed centrifuge. The gunman let go of the gun and Malone, spurning it, let it drop.

He didn't need it. His other hand had gone into his coat and come out again with the .44 Magnum.

The thug at the front of the car had barely realized what was happening by the time it was all over. Automatic reflexes turned him away from the driver and toward the source of danger, his gun pointing toward Malone. But the reflexes gave out as he found himself staring down a rifled

steel tube which, though hardly more than seven-sixteenths of an inch in diameter, must have looked as though a high-speed locomotive might come roaring out of it at any second.

Malone hardly needed to bark: "*Drop it!*" The revolver hit the seat next to the cabbie.

"Driver," Malone said in a conversational voice, "can you handle a gun?"

"Why, it is better than even that I still can," the cabbie said. "I am in the business myself many years ago, before I see the error of my ways and buy a taxi with the profits I make. It is a high-pay business," he went on, "but very insecure."

The cabbie scooped up the weapon by his side, flipped out the cylinder expertly to check the cartridges, flipped it back in and centered the muzzle on the gunman who'd dropped the revolver.

"It is more than thirty years since I use one of these," he said gently, "but I do not forget how to pull the trigger, and at this range I can hardly miss."

Malone noticed vaguely that he was still holding hands with the second gunman, and that this one was trying to struggle free. Malone shrugged and eased off a bit, at the same time shifting his own aim. The .44 Magnum now pointed at gunman number two, and the cabbie was aiming at gunman number one. The tableau was silent for some seconds.

"Now," Malone said at last, "we wait. Driver, if you would sort of lean against your horn button, we

might be able to speed things up a little. The light has turned green."

"The local constables," the cabbie said, "do not bother with stalled cars in traffic these days."

"But," Malone pointed out, "I have a hunch no cop could resist a taxi which is not only stalled and blocking traffic but is also blatting its horn continuously. Strike or no strike," he finished sententiously, "there are things beyond the power of man to ignore."

"Friend," the cabbie said, "you convince me. It is a good move." He sagged slightly against the horn button, keeping the gun centered at all times on the man before him.

The horn began to wail horribly.

The first gunman swallowed nervously. "Hey, now, listen," he said, shouting slightly above the horn. "This wasn't anything. Just a gag, see? A little gag. We was playing a joke. On a friend."

The driver addressed Malone. "Do you ever see either of these boys before?"

"Never," Malone said.

"Nor do I," the cabbie said. He eyed the gunman. "We are not your friend," he said. "Either of us."

"No, no," the gunman said. "Not you. This friend, he . . . uh . . . owns a taxi, and we thought this was it. It was kind of a joke, see? A friendly joke, that's all. Believe me, the gun's not even loaded. Both of them aren't. Phony bullets, honest. Believe me?"

"Why, naturally I believe you," the cabbie said politely. "I never

doubt the word of a stranger, especially such an honest-appearing stranger as you seem to be. And since the gun is loaded with false bullets, as you say, all you have to do is reach over and take it away from me."

There was a short silence.

"A joke," the gunman said feebly. "Honest, just a joke."

"We believe you," Malone assured him grandly. "As a matter of fact, we appreciate the joke so much that we want you to tell it to a panel of twelve citizens, a judge and a couple of lawyers, so they can appreciate it, too. They get little fun out of life and your joke may give them a few moments of happiness. Why hide your light under an alibi?"

The horn continued its dismal wail for a few seconds more before two patrolmen and a sergeant came up on horses. It took somewhat more time than that for Malone to convince the sergeant that he didn't have time to go down to the station to prefer charges. He showed his identification and the police were suitably impressed.

"Lock 'em up for violating the Sullivan Law," he said. "I'm sure they don't have licenses for these lovely little guns of theirs."

"Probably not," the sergeant agreed. "There's been an awful lot of this kind of thing going on lately. But here's an idea: the cabbie here can come on with us."

The top of the cabbie's head turned pale. "That," he said, "is the trouble with being a law-abiding citizen such as I have been for upwards of thirty

years. Because I do not want to lose twenty dollars to these young strangers, I lose twenty dollars' worth of time in a precinct station; the air of which is very bad for my asthma."

Malone, taking the hint, dug a twenty out of his pockets, and then added another to it, remembering how much he had spent in Las Vegas, where his money funneled slowly into the pockets of Primo Palveri. The cabbie took the money with haste and politeness and stowed it away.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I am now prepared to spend the entire night signing affidavits, if enough affidavits can be dug up." He looked pleased.

"Mr. Malone," the sergeant said wearily, "people just don't realize what's going on in this town. We never did have half enough cops, and now, with so many men resigning and getting arrested and suspended, we haven't got a quarter enough. People think this strike business is funny, but if we spent any time fiddling around with traffic and parking tickets, we'd never have time to stop even crimes like this, let alone the big jobs. As it is, though, there haven't been a lot of big ones. Every hood in the city's out to make a couple of bucks—but that's it so far, thank God."

Malone nodded. "How about the FBI?" he said. "Want them to come in and help?"

"Mr. Malone," the sergeant said, "the City of New York can take very good care of itself; without outside interference."

OCCASION FOR DISASTER

Some day, Malone told himself, good old New York City was going to secede from the Union and form a new country entirely. Then it would have a war with New Jersey and probably be wiped right off the map.

Viewing the traffic around him as he hunted for another cab, he wasn't at all sure that that was a bad idea. He began to wish vaguely that he had borrowed one of the policemen's horses.

Malone wasn't in the least worried about arriving at Mike Sand's office late. In the first place, Sand was notorious for sleeping late and working late to make up for it. His work schedule was somewhere around forty-five degrees out of phase with the rest of the world, which made it just about average for the National Brotherhood of Truckers. It had never agitated for a nine-to-five work day. A man driving a truck, after all, worked all sorts of odd hours—and the union officials did the same, maybe just to prove that they were all good truckers at heart.

The sign over the door read:

National Headquarters
NATIONAL BROTHERHOOD
OF TRUCKERS
Welcome, Brother

Malone pushed at the door and it swung open, revealing a rather dingy-looking foyer. More Good Old Truckers At Heart, he told himself. Mike Sand owned a quasi-palatial mansion in Puerto Rico for winter use, and a two-floor, completely air-conditioned apartment on Fifth Ave-

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nue for summer use. But the Headquarters Building looked dingy enough to make truckers conscience-stricken about paying back dues.

Behind the reception desk there was a man whose face was the approximate shape and color of a slightly used waffle. He looked up from his crossword puzzle as Malone came in, apparently trying to decide whether or not this new visitor should be greeted with: "Welcome, Brother!"

Taking pity on his indecision, Malone strode to the desk and said: "Tell Mike Sand he has a visitor."

The waffle-faced man blinked. "Mr. Sand is busy right now," he said. "Who wants to talk to him?"

Malone tried to look steely-eyed and tough. "You pick up the intercom," he said, "and you tell Sand there's a man out here who's in the cloak-and-suit business."

"The what?"

"Tell him this man is worried about a recent shipment of buttons," Malone went on.

"Mister," the waffle-faced man said, "you're nuts."

"So I'm nuts," Malone said. "Make the call."

It was put through. After a few minutes of earnest conversation the man turned to look at Malone again, dizzied wonder in his eyes. "Mr. Sand says go right up," he told the FBI Agent in a shocked voice. "Elevator to the third floor."

Malone went over to the elevator, stepped in and pressed the third-floor button. As the doors closed, the familiar itch of precognition began to

assail him again. This time he had nothing else to distract him. He paid very close attention to it as he was carried slowly and creakily upward.

He looked up. There was an escape-hatch in the top of the car. Standing on tiptoe, he managed to lift it aside, grasp the edges of the resulting hole, and pull himself up through the hole to the top of the car. He looked back down, memorizing the elevator, and then pulled the hatch shut again. There was a small peephole in it, and Malone put his eye to it and waited.

About twenty seconds later, the car stopped and the doors opened. A little more time passed, and then a gun, closely followed by a man, edged around the door frame.

"What the hell," the man said. "The car's empty!"

Another voice said: "Let's cover the stairway."

Two pairs of footsteps receded rapidly down the hall. Malone, gun in hand, teleported himself back to the previously memorized elevator, tiptoed to the door and looked out. The two men were standing at the far end of the hall, posted at either side of the stairwell and obviously waiting for him to come on up.

Instead, he tiptoed out of the elevator hefting his gun, and came up silently behind the pair. When he was within ten feet he stopped and said, very politely: "Drop the guns, boys."

The guns thudded to the floor and the two men turned round.

"All right," Malone said, smiling



into their astonished faces. "Now, let's go on and see Mr. Sand."

He picked up the guns with his free hand and put them into his coat pockets. Together, the three men went down toward the lighted office at the far end of the hall.

"Open it," Malone said as they came to the door. He followed them into the office. Behind a battered, worm-eaten desk in a dingy room sat a very surprised-looking Mike Sand.

He was only about five feet six, but he looked as if weighed over two hundred pounds. He had huge shoulders and a thick neck, and his face was sleepy-looking. He seemed to have lost a lot of fights in his long career; Sand, Malone reflected, was nearing fifty now, and he was beginning to look his age. His short hair, once black, was turning to iron-gray.

He didn't say anything. Malone smiled at him pleasantly. "These boys were carrying deadly weapons," he told Sand in a polite voice. "That's hardly the way to treat a brother." His precognitive warning system wasn't ringing any alarm bells, but he kept his gun trained on the pair of thugs as he walked over to Mike Sand's desk and took the two extra revolvers from his pocket. "You'd better keep these, Sand," he said. "Your boys don't know how to handle them."

Sand grinned sourly, pulled open a desk drawer and swept the guns into it with one motion of his ham-like hand. He didn't look at Malone. "You guys better go downstairs and keep Jerry company," he said. "You

can do crossword puzzles together."

"Now, Mike, we—" one of them began.

Mike Sand snorted. "Go on," he said. "Scram."

"But he was supposed to be in the elevator, and we—"

"Scram," Sand said. It sounded like a curse. The two men got out. "Like apes in the trees," Sand said heavily. "Ask for bright boys and what do you get? Everything," he went on dismissively, "is going to hell."

That line, Malone reflected, was beginning to have all the persistence of a bass-bourdon. It droned its melancholy way through anything and everything else. He sighed deeply, thought about a cigar and lit a cigarette instead. It tasted awful. "About those buttons—" he said.

"I got nothing to do with buttons," Sand said.

"You do with these," Malone said. "A shipment of buttons from the Nevada desert. You grabbed them from Palveri."

"I got nothing to do with it," Sand said.

Malone looked around and found a chair and an ashtray. He grabbed one and sat down in the other. "I'm not from Castelnuovo," he said. "Or Palveri, or any of the Mafia boys. If I were, you'd know it fast enough."

Sand regarded him from under eyelids made almost entirely of scar-tissue. "I guess so," he said sourly at last. "But what do you want to know about the stuff? And who are you, anyhow?"

"The name's Malone," Malone said. "You might say trouble is my business. Or something like that. I see an opportunity to create a little trouble—but not for you. That is, if you want to hear some more about those buttons. Of course, if you had nothing to do with it—"

"All right," Sand said. "All right. But it was strictly a legitimate proposition, understand?"

"Sure," Malone said. "Strictly legitimate."

"Well, it was," Sand said defensively. "We got to stop scab trucking, don't we? And that Palveri was using nonunion boys on the trucks. We had to stop them; it was a service to the Brotherhood, understand?"

"And the peyotl buttons?" Malone asked.

Sand shrugged. "So we had to confiscate the cargo, didn't we?" he said. "To teach them a lesson. Nonunion drivers, that's what we're against."

"And you're for peyotl," Malone said, "so you can make it into peyote and get enough money to refurbish Brotherhood Headquarters."

"Now, look," Sand said. "You think you're tough and you can get away with a lot of wisecracks. That's a wrong idea, brother." He didn't move, but he suddenly seemed set to spring. Malone wondered if, just maybe, his precognition had blown a fuse.

"O.K., let's forget it," he said. "But I've got some inside lines, Sand. You didn't get the real shipment."

"Didn't get it?" Sand said with

raised eyebrows. "I got it. It's right where I can put my finger on it now."

"That was the fake," Malone said easily. "They knew you were after a shipment, Sand, so they suckered you in. They fed your spies with false information and sent you out after the fake shipment."

"Fake shipment?" Sand said. "It's the real stuff, brother. The real stuff."

"But not enough of it," Malone said. "Their big shipments are almost three times what you got. They made one while you were suckered off with the fake—and they're making another one next week. Interested?"

Sand snorted. "The hell," he said. "Didn't you hear me say I got the first shipment right where I can put my finger on it?"

"So?" Malone said.

"So I can't get rid of it," Sand said. "What do I want with a new load? Every day I hold the stuff is dangerous. You never know when somebody's going to look for it and maybe find it."

"Can't get rid of it?" Malone said. This was a new turn of events. "What's happening?"

"Everything," Sand said tersely. "Look, you want to sell me some information—but you don't know the setup. Maybe when I tell you, you'll stop bothering me." He put his head in his hands, and his voice, when he spoke again, was muffled. "The contacts are gone," he said. "With the arrests and the resignations and everything else, nobody wants to take any chances; the few guys that aren't

locked up are scared they will be. I can't make any kind of a deal for anything. There just isn't any action."

"Things are tough, huh?" Malone said hopelessly. Apparently even Mike Sand wasn't going to pan out for him.

"Things are terrible," Sand said. "The locals are having revolutions—guys there are kicking out the men from National Headquarters. Nobody knows where he stands any more—a lot of my organizers have been goofing up and getting arrested for one thing and another. Like apes in the trees, that's what."

Malone nodded very slowly and took another puff of the cigarette. "Nothing's going right," he said.

"Listen," Sand said. "You want to hear trouble? My account books are in duplicate—you know? Just to keep things nice and peaceful and quiet."

"One for the investigators and one for the money," Malone said.

"Sure," Sand said, preoccupied with trouble. "You know the setup. But both sets are missing. Both sets." He raised his head, the picture of witless agony. "I've got an idea where they are, too. I'm just waiting for the axe to fall."

"O.K.," Malone said. "Where are they?"

"The U. S. Attorney's Office," Sand said dismally. He stared down at his battered desk and sighed.

Malone stubbed out his cigarette. "So you're not in the market for any more buttons?" he said.

"All I'm in the market for," Sand

said without raising his eyes, "is a nice, painless way to commit suicide."

Malone walked several blocks without noticing where he was going. He tried to think things over, and everything seemed to fall into a pattern that remained, agonizingly, just an inch or so out of his mental reach. The mental bursts, the trouble the United States was having, Palveri, Queen Elizabeth, Burris, Mike Sand, Dr. O'Connor, Sir Lewis Carter and even Luba Ardanko juggled and flowed in his mind like pieces out of a kaleidoscope. But they refused to form any pattern he could recognize.

He uttered a short curse and managed to collide with a bulky woman with frazzled black hair. "Pardon me," he said politely.

"The hell with it," the woman said, looking straight past him, and went jerkily on her way. Malone blinked and looked around him. There were a lot of people still on the streets, but they didn't look like normal New York City people. They were all curiously tense and wary, as if they were suspicious not only of him and each other, but even themselves. He caught sight of several illegal-looking bulges beneath men's armpits, and many heavily sagging pockets. One or two women appeared to be unduly solicitous of their large and heavy handbags. But it wasn't his job to enforce the Sullivan Law, he told himself. Especially while he was on vacation.

A single foot patrolman stood a few feet ahead, guarding a liquor store with drawn revolver, his eyes scanning the passers-by warily while he waited for help. Behind him, the smashed plate glass and broken bottles and the sprawled figure just inside the door told a fairly complete story.

Down the block, Malone saw several stores that carried *Closed* or *Gone Out Of Business* signs. The whole depressing picture gave him the feeling that all the tragedies of the 1930-1935 period had somehow been condensed into the past two weeks.

Ahead there was a chain drugstore, and Malone headed for it. Two uniformed men wearing Special Police badges were standing near the door eyeing everyone with suspicion, but Malone managed to get past them and went on to a telephone booth. He tried dialling the Washington number of the FBI, but got only a continuous *beep-beep*, indicating a service delay. Finally he managed to get a special operator, who told him sorrowfully that calls to Washington were jamming all available trunk lines.

Malone glanced around to make sure nobody was watching. Then he teleported himself to his apartment in Washington and, on arriving, headed for the phone there. Using that one, he dialed again, got Pelham's sad face on the screen, and asked for Thomas Boyd.

Boyd didn't look any different, Malone thought, though maybe he

was a little more tired. Henry VIII had obviously had a hard day trying to get his wives to stop nagging him. "Ken," he said. "I thought you were on vacation. What are you doing calling up the FBI, or do you just want to feel superior to us poor working slob?"

"I need some information," Malone said.

Boyd uttered a short, mirthless laugh. "How to beat the tables, you mean?" he said. "How are things in good old Las Vegas?"

Malone, realizing that with direct-dial phones Boyd had no idea where he was actually calling from, kept wisely quiet. "How about Burris?" he said after a second. "Has he come up with any new theories yet?"

"New theories?" Boyd said. "What about?"

"Everything," Malone said. "From all I see in the papers things haven't been quieting down any. Is it still Brubitsch, Borbitsch and Garbitsch putting psychodrugs in water-coolers, or has something new been added?"

"I don't know what the chief thinks," Boyd said. "Things'll straighten out in a while. We're working on it—twenty-four hours a day, or damn near, but we're working. While you take a nice, long vacation that—"

"I want you to get me something," Malone said. "Just go and get it and send it to me at Las Vegas."

"Money?" Boyd said with raised eyebrows.

"Dossiers," Malone said. "On Mike Sand and Primo Palveri."

"Palveri I can understand," Boyd said. "You want to threaten him with exposure unless he lets you beat the roulette tables. But why Sand? Ken, are you working on something psionic?"

"Me?" Malone said sweetly. "I'm on vacation."

"The chief won't like—"

"Can you send me the dossiers?" Malone interrupted.

Boyd shook his head very slowly. "Ken, I can't do it without the chief finding out about it. If you are working on something . . . hell, I'd like to help you. But I don't see how I can. You don't know what things are like here."

"What are they like?" Malone said.

"The full force is here," Boyd said. "As far as I know, you're the only vacation leave not canceled yet. And not only that, but we've got agents in from the Sureté and New Scotland Yard, agents from Belgium and Germany and Holland and Japan . . . Ken, we've even got three MVD men here working with us."

"It's happening all over?" Malone said.

"All over the world," Boyd said. "Ken, I'm beginning to think we've got a case of Martian Invaders on our hands. Or something like it." He paused. "But we're licking them, Ken," he went on. "Slowly but surely, we're licking them."

"How do you mean?" Malone said.

"Crime is down," Boyd said, "away down. Major crime, I mean—petty theft, assault, breaking and entering and that sort of thing has gone away

up, but that's to be expected. Everything's going to—"

"Skip the handbasket," Malone said. "But you're working things out?"

"Sooner or later," Boyd said. "Every piece of equipment and every man in the FBI is working overtime; we can't be stopped forever."

"I'll wave flags," Malone said bitterly. "And I wish I could join you."

"Believe me," Boyd said, "you don't know when you're well off."

Malone switched off. He looked at his watch; it was ten-thirty.

XII

That made it eight-thirty in Las Vegas. Malone opened his eyes again in his hotel room there. He had half an hour to spare until his dinner date with Luba. That gave him plenty of time to shower, shave and dress, and he felt pleased to have managed the timing so neatly.

Two minutes later, he was soaking in the luxury of a hot tub, allowing the warmth to relax his body while his mind turned over the facts he had collected. There were a lot of them, but they didn't seem to mean anything special.

The world, he told himself, was going to hell in a handbasket. That was all very well and good, but just what was the handbasket made of? Burris' theory, the more he thought about it, was a pure case of mental soapsuds, with perhaps a dash of old cotton-candy to make confusion even worse confounded.

And there wasn't any other theory, was there?

Well, Malone reflected, there was one, or at least a part of one. Her Majesty had said that everything was somehow tied up with the mental bursts—and that sounded a lot more probable. Assuming that the bursts and the rest of the mixups were *not* connected made, as a matter of fact, very little sense; it was multiplying hypotheses without reason. When two unusual things happen, they have at least one definite connection: they're both unusual. The sensible thing to do, Malone thought, was to look for more connections.

Which meant asking who was causing the bursts, and why. Her Majesty had said that she didn't know, and couldn't do it herself. Obviously, though, some telepath or a team of telepaths was doing the job. And the only trouble with that, Malone reflected sadly, was that all telepaths were in the Yucca Flats laboratory.

It was at this point that he sat upright in the tub, splashing water over the floor and gripping the soap with a strange excitement. Who'd ever said that *all* the telepaths were in Yucca Flats? All the ones so far discovered were—but that, obviously, was an entirely different matter.

Her majesty didn't know about any others, true. But Malone thought of his own mind-shield. If he could make himself telepathically "invisible," why couldn't someone else? Dr. Marshall's theories seemed to point the other way—but they only went

for telepaths like Her Majesty, who were psychotic. A sane telepath, Malone thought, might conceivably develop such a mind-shield.

All known telepaths were nuts, he told himself. Now, he began to see why. He'd started out, two years before, *hunting* for nuts, and for idiots. But they wouldn't even know anything about sane telepaths—the sane ones probably wouldn't even want to communicate with them.

A sane telepath was pretty much of an unknown quantity. But that, Malone told himself with elation, was exactly what he was looking for. Could a sane telepath do what an insane one couldn't—and project thoughts, or at least mental bursts?

He got out of the cooling tub and grabbed for a terry-cloth robe. Not even bothering about the time, he closed his eyes. When he opened them again he was in the Yucca Flats apartment of Dr. Thomas O'Connor.

O'Connor wasn't sleeping, exactly. He sat in a chair in his bare-looking living room, a book open on his lap, his head nodding slightly. Malone's entrance made no sound, and O'Connor didn't move or look around.

"Doctor," Malone said, "is it possible that—"

O'Connor came up off the chair a good foot and a half. He went: "Eee," and came down again, still gripping the book. His head turned.

"It's me," Malone said.

"Indeed," O'Connor said. "Indeed indeed. My goodness." He opened his mouth some more but no words

came out of it. "Eee," he said again, at last, in a conversational tone.

Malone took a deep breath. "I'm sorry I startled you," he said, "but this is important and it couldn't wait." O'Connor stared blankly at him. "Dr. O'Connor," Malone said, "it's me. Kenneth J. Malone. I want to talk to you."

At last O'Connor's expression returned almost to normal. "Mr. Malone," he said, "you are undressed."

Malone sighed. "This is important, doctor," he said. "Let's not waste time with all that kind of thing."

"But, Mr. Malone—" O'Connor began frostily.

"I need some information," Malone said, "and maybe you've got it. What do you know about telepathic projection?"

"About what?" O'Connor said. "Do you mean nontelepaths receiving some sort of . . . communication from telepaths?"

"Right," Malone said. "Mind-to-mind communication, of course; I'm not interested in the United States mail or the telephone companies. How about it, doctor? Is it possible?"

O'Connor gnawed at his lower lip for a second. "There have been cases reported," he said at last. "Very few have been written up with any accuracy, and those seem to be confined to close relatives or loved ones of the person projecting the message."

"Is that necessary?" Malone said. "Isn't it possible that—"

"Further," O'Connor said, getting back into his lecture-room stride, "I

think you'll find that the . . . ah . . . message so received is one indicating that the projector of such a message is in dire peril. He has, for instance, been badly injured, or is rapidly approaching death, or else he has narrowly escaped death."

"What does that have to do with it?" Malone said. "I mean, why should all those requirements be necessary?"

O'Connor frowned slightly. "Because," he said, "the amount of psionic energy necessary for such a feat is tremendous. Usually, it is the final burst of energy, the outpouring of all the remaining psionic force immediately before death. And if death does not occur, the person is at the least greatly weakened; his mind, if it ever does recover, needs time and rest to do so."

"And he reaches a relative or a loved one," Malone said, "because the linkage is easier; there's some thought of him in that other mind for him to 'tune in' on."

"We assume so," O'Connor said.

"Very well, then," Malone said. "I'll assume so, too. But if the energy is so great, then a person couldn't do this sort of thing very often."

"Hardly," O'Connor said.

Malone nodded. "It's like . . . like giving blood to a blood bank," he said. "Giving . . . oh, three quarts of blood. It might not kill you. But if it didn't, you'd be weak for a long time."

"Exactly," O'Connor said. "A good analogy, Mr. Malone." Malone looked at him and felt relieved that he'd

managed to get the conversation onto pure lecture-room science so quickly. O'Connor, easily at home in that world, had been able to absorb the shock of Malone's sudden appearance while providing the facts in his own inimitable, frozen manner.

"So one telepath couldn't go on doing it all the time," he said. "But—how about several people?"

"Several people?" O'Connor said.

"I mean . . . well, let's look at that blood bank again," Malone said. "You need three quarts of blood. But one person doesn't have to give it. Suppose twelve people gave half a pint each."

"Ah," O'Connor said. "I see. Or twenty-four people, giving a quarter-pint each. Or—"

"That's the idea," Malone said hurriedly. "I guess there'd be a point of diminishing returns, but that's the point. Would something like that be possible?"

O'Connor thought for what seemed like a long time. "It might," he said at last. "At least theoretically. But it would take a great deal of mental co-ordination among the participants. They would all have to be telepaths, of course."

"In order to mesh their thoughts right on the button, and direct them properly and at the correct time," Malone said. "Right?"

"Ah . . . correct," O'Connor said. "Given that, Mr. Malone, I imagine that it might possibly be done."

"Wonderful," Malone said.

"However," O'Connor said, apparently glad to throw even a little

cold water on the notion, "it could not be done for very long periods of time, you understand. It would happen in rather short bursts."

"That's right," Malone said, enjoying the crestfallen look on O'Connor's face. "That's exactly what I was looking for."

"I'm . . . ah . . . glad to have been of service," O'Connor said. "However, Mr. Malone, I should like to request—"

"Oh, don't worry," Malone said. "I won't slam the door." He vanished.

It was eight-fifty. Hurriedly, he rinsed himself off, shaved and put on his evening clothes. But he was still late—it was two minutes after nine when he showed up at the door that led off the lobby to the Universal Joint. Luba was, surprisingly, waiting for him there.

"Ready for a vast feast?" she asked pleasantly.

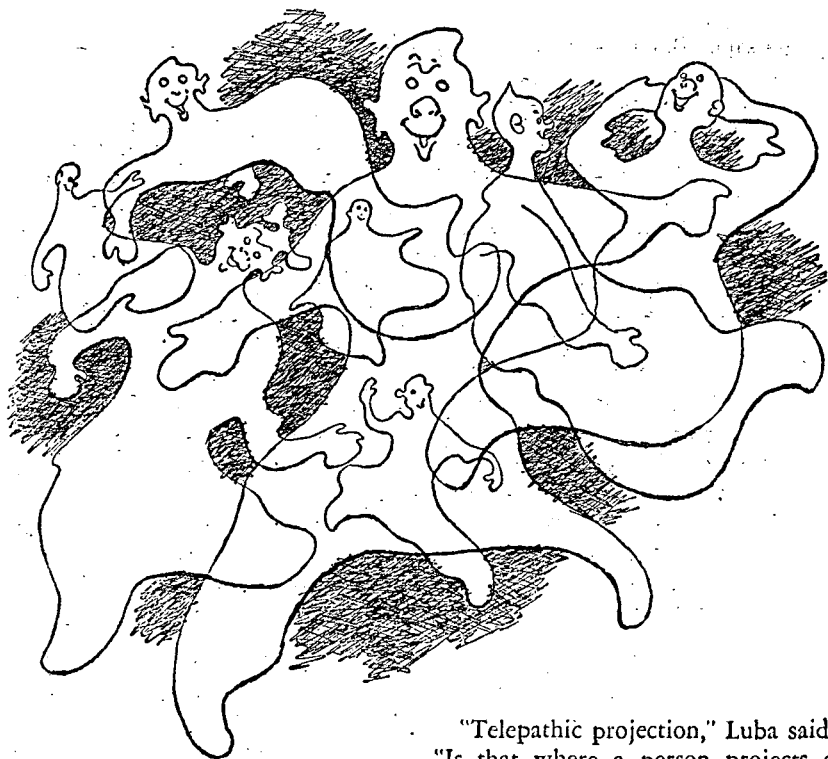
"In about a minute and a half," Malone said. "Do you mind waiting that long?"

"Frankly," Luba said, "in five minutes I will be gnawing holes in the gold paneling around here. And I do want to catch the first floor show, too. I understand they've got a girl who has—"

"That," Malone said sternly, "should interest me more than it does you."

"I'm always interested in what the competition is doing," Luba said.

"Nevertheless," Malone began, and stopped. After a second he started again: "Anyhow, this is important."



"All right," she said instantly. "What is it?"

He led her away from the door to an alcove in the lobby where they could talk without being overheard. "Can you get hold of Sir Lewis at this time of night?" he asked.

"Sir Lewis?" she said. "If . . . if it's urgent, I suppose I could."

"It's urgent," Malone said. "I need all the data on telepathic projection I can get. The scientists have given me some of it—maybe Psychical Research has some more. I imagine it's all mixed up with ghosts and ectoplasm, but—"

"Telepathic projection," Luba said. "Is that where a person projects a thought into somebody else's mind?"

"That's it," Malone said. "Can Sir Lewis get me all the data on that tonight?"

"Tonight?" Luba said. "It's pretty late and what with sending them from New York to Nevada—"

"Don't bother about that," Malone said. "Just send 'em to the FBI Offices in New York. I'll have the boys there make copies and send the copies on." Instead, he thought, he would tele-report to New York himself. But Luba definitely didn't have to know that.

"He'd have to send the originals," Luba said.

"I'll guarantee their safety," Malone said. "But I need the data right now."

Luba hesitated.

"Tell him to bill the FBI," Malone said. "Call him collect and he can bill the phone call, too."

"All right, Ken," Luba said at last. "I'll try."

She went off to make the call, and came back in a few minutes.

"O.K.?" Malone said.

She smiled at him, very gently. "O.K.," she said. "Now let's go in to dinner, before I get any hungrier and the Great Universal loses some of its paneling."

Dinner, Malone told himself, was going to be wonderful. He was alone with Luba, and he was in a fancy, fine, expensive place. He was happy, and Luba was happy, and everything was going to be perfectly frabjous.

It was. He had no desire whatever, when dinner and the floor show were over, to leave Luba. Unfortunately, he did have work to do—work that was more important than anything else he could imagine. He made a tentative date for the next day, went to his room, and from there teleported himself to FBI Headquarters, New York.

The agent-in-charge looked up at him. "Hey," he said. "I thought you were on vacation, Malone."

"How come everybody knows about me being on vacation?" Malone said sourly.

The agent-in-charge shrugged. "The only leave not canceled?" he said. "Hell, it was all over the place in five minutes."

"O.K., O.K.," Malone said. "Don't remind me. Is there a package for me?"

The agent-in-charge produced a large box. "A messenger brought it," he said. "From the Psychical Research Society," he said. "What is it, ghosts?"

"Dehydrated," Malone said. "Just add ectoplasm and out they come, shouting *Boo!* at everybody."

"Sounds wonderful," the agent-in-charge said. "Can I come to the party?"

"First," Malone said judiciously, "you'd have to be dead. Of course I can arrange that—"

"Thanks," the agent-in-charge said, leaving in a hurry. Malone went on down to his office and opened the box. It contained books, pamphlets and reports from Sir Lewis, all dealing with some area of telepathic projection. He spent a few minutes looking them over and trying to make some connected sense out of them, but finally he gave up and just sat and thought. The material seemed to be no help at all; it told him even less than Dr. O'Connor had.

What he needed, he decided, was somebody to talk to. But who? He couldn't talk to the FBI, and nobody else knew much about what he was trying to investigate. He thought of Her Majesty and rejected the notion with a sigh. No, what he needed was somebody smart and quick, somebody who could be depended on, somebody with training and knowledge.

And then, very suddenly, he knew who he wanted.

"Well, now, Sir Kenneth," he said. "Let's put everything together and see what happens."

"Indeed," said Sir Kenneth Malone, "it is high time we did so, Sirrah. Proceed: I shall attend."

"Let's start from the beginning," Malone said. "We know there's confusion in all parts of the country—in all parts of the world, I guess. And we know that confusion is being caused by carefully timed accidents and errors. We also know that these errors appear to be accompanied by violent bursts of psionic static—violent energy. And we know, further, that on three specific occasions, these bursts of energy were immediately followed by a reversal of policy in the mind of the person on the receiving end."

"You mean," Sir Kenneth put in, "that these gentlemen changed their opinions."

"Correct," Malone said. "I refer, of course, to the firm of Brubitsch, Borbitsch and Garbitsch, Spying Done Cheap."

"Indeed," Sir Kenneth said. "Then the operators of this strange force, whatever it may prove to be, must have some interest in allowing the spies' confession?"

"Maybe," Malone said. "Let's leave that for later. To get back to the beginning of all this: it seems to me to follow that the accidents and errors which have caused all the confusion throughout the world happen because somebody's mind is changed just the right amount at the right time. A man does something he didn't intend

to do—or else he forgets to do it at all."

"Ah," Sir Kenneth said. "We have done those things we ought not to have done; we have left undone those things we ought to have done. And you feel, Sirrah, that a telepathic command is the cause of this confusion?"

"A series of them," Malone said. "But we also know, from Dr. O'Connor, that it takes a great deal of psychic energy to perform this particular trick—more than a person can normally afford to expend."

"Marry, now," Sir Kenneth said. "Meseemeth this is not reasonable. Changing the mind of a man indeed seems a small thing in comparison to teleportation, or psychokinesis, or levitation or any such witchery. And yet it take more power than any of these?"

Malone thought for a second. "Sure it does," he said. "I'd say it was a matter of resistance. Moving an inanimate object is pretty simple—comparatively, anyhow—because inert matter has no mental resistance."

"And moving oneself?" Sir Kenneth said.

"There's some resistance there, probably," Malone said. "But you'll remember that the Fueyo system of training for teleportation involved overcoming your own mental resistance to the idea."

"True," Sir Kenneth said. "'Tis true. Then let us agree that it takes great power to effect this change. Where does our course point from that agreement, Sirrah?"

"Next," Malone said, "we have to

do a little supposing. This project must be handled by a fairly large group, since no individual can do it alone. This large group has to be telepathic—and not only for the reasons Dr. O'Connor and I specified."

"And why else?" Sir Kenneth demanded.

"They've also got to know exactly when to make this victim of theirs change his mind," Malone said. "Right?"

"Correct," Sir Kenneth said.

"We've got to look for a widespread organization of telepaths," Malone said, "with enough mental discipline to hold onto a tough mental shield. Strong, trained, sane men."

"A difficult assignment," Sir Kenneth commented.

"Well," Malone said, "suppose you hold on for a second—don't go away—and let me figure something out."

"I shall wait," Sir Kenneth said, "without."

"Without what?" Malone murmured. But there was no time for games. Now, then, he told himself—and sneezed.

He shook his head, cursed softly and went on.

Now, then . . .

There was an organization, spread all over the Western world, and with what were undoubtedly secret branches in the Soviet Union. The organization had to be an old one—because it had to have trained telepaths, of a high degree of efficiency. And training took time.

There was something else to con-

sider, too. In order to organize to such a degree that they could wreak the complete havoc they were wreaking, the organization couldn't be completely secret; there are always leaks, always suspicious events, and a society that spent time covering all of those up would have no time for anything else.

So the organization had to be a known one, in the Western world at least—a known group, masquerading as something else.

So far, everything made sense. Malone frowned and tried to think. Where, he wondered, did he go from here?

Maybe this time a list would help. He found a pencil and a piece of paper, and headed the paper: *Organization*. Then he started putting down what he knew about it, and what he'd figured out:

1. Large
2. Old
3. Disguised

It sounded, so far, just a little like Frankenstein's Monster wearing a red wig. But what else did he know about it?

After a second's thought, he murmured: "Nothing," and put the pencil down.

But that, he realized, wasn't quite true. He knew one more thing about the organization. He knew they'd probably be immune to the confusion everybody else was suffering from. The organization would be—had to be—efficient. It would be composed of intelligent, superbly co-operative people, who could work together as a

unit without in the least impairing their own individuality.

He reached for the pencil again, and put down:

4. Efficient

He looked at it. Now it didn't remind him so much of the Monster. But it didn't look terribly familiar, either. Who did he know, he thought, who was large, old, disguised and efficient?

It sounded like an improbable combination. He set the paper down, clearing off some of the PRS books to make room for it. And then he stopped.

The papers the PRS had sent him

...

And he'd gotten them so quickly, so efficiently ...

They were a large organization

...

And an old one ...

He looked for a desk phone, found one and grabbed at it frantically.

The girl who answered the phone looked familiar. Malone suddenly remembered to check the time—it was just after nine. The girl stared at him. She did not look terribly old, but she was large and she had to be disguised. There seemed to be a lot of teeth running around in this case, Malone thought, between the burlesque stripper in Las Vegas and Miss Dental Display here in New York. Nobody, he told himself, could have collected that many teeth honestly.

"Psychical Research Society," she said. "Oh, Mr. Malone. Good morning."

"Sir Lewis," Malone said in a rush. "Sir Lewis Carter. I want to talk to him. Hurry."

"Sir Lewis Carter?" the girl said very slowly. "Oh, I'm sorry, Mr. Malone; but he won't be in at all today."

"Home number," Malone said desperately. "I've got to."

"Well, I can give you that, Mr. Malone," she said, "but it wouldn't do you any good, really. Because he went away on his vacation and when he does that he never tells us where. You know? He won't be back for two or three weeks," she added as an afterthought.

Malone said: "Oog," and thought for less than a second. "Somebody official," he said. "Got to talk to somebody official. Now."

"Oh, I can't do that either, Mr. Malone," the toothy girl said. "All of the executives already left on their vacation. They just left a skeleton force here at the office."

"They're all gone?" Malone said hollowly.

"That's right," the girl said with great cheer. "As a matter of fact, I'm in charge now. You know?"

"I'm afraid I do," Malone said. "It's very important, though. You don't have any idea where any of them went?"

"None at all," she said. "I'm sorry, but that's how it is. Maybe if you were me you'd ask questions, but I just follow orders and those were my orders. To take over until they get back. You know? They didn't tell me where and I just didn't ask."

"Great," Malone said. He wanted

to shoot himself. Everything was obvious now—about twenty-four hours too late. And now, they'd all gone—for two weeks—or for good.

The girl's rancid voice broke in on his thoughts.

"Oh, Mr. Malone," she said. "I'm sorry, but I just remembered they left a note for you."

"A note?" Malone said. "For me?"

"Sir Lewis said you might call," the girl said, "and he left a message. If you'll hold on a minute I'll read it."

Malone waited tensely. The girl found a slip of paper, blinked at it and read:

"My dear Malone, I'm afraid that what you have deduced is quite correct; and, as you can see, that leaves us no alternative. Sorry, Miss Luba A. sends her apologies to you, since she is joining us; my apologies are also tendered." The girl looked up. "It's signed by Sir Lewis," she said. "Does that mean anything to you, Mr. Malone?"

"I'm afraid it does," Malone said blankly. "It means entirely too much."

XIII

After Miss Dental Display had faded from Malone's screen, he just sat there, looking at the dead, gray front of the visiphone and feeling about twice as dead and at least three times as gray.

Things, he told himself, were terrible. But even that sentence, which was a good deal more cheerful than what he actually felt, did nothing

whatever to improve his mood. All of the evidence, after all, had been practically living on the tip of his nose for God alone knew how long, and not only had he done nothing about it, he hadn't even seen it.

There was the organization, staring him in the face. There was Luba—nobody's fool, no starry-eyed dreamer of occult dreams. She was part of the Psychical Research Society, why hadn't he thought to wonder why she was connected with it?

And there was his own mind-shield. Why hadn't he wondered whether other telepaths might not have the same shield?

He thought about Luba and told himself bitterly that from now on she was Miss Ardanko. Enough, he told himself, was enough. From now on he was calling her by her last name, formally and distantly. In his own mind, anyhow.

Facts came tumbling in on him like the side of a mountain falling on a hapless traveler, during a landslide season. And, Malone told himself, he had never possessed less hap in all of his ill-starred life.

And then, very suddenly, one more fact arrived, and pushed the rest out into the black night of Malone's bitter mind. He stood up, pushing the books away, and closed his eyes. When he opened them he went to the telephone in his Las Vegas hotel suite, and switched it on. A smiling operator appeared. Malone wanted to see him die of poison, slowly.

"Give me Room 4-T," he snapped. "Hurry."

"Room forty?" the operator asked. "Damn it," Malone said, "I said 4-T and I meant 4-T. Four as in four and T as in—as in China. And hurry."

"Oh," the operator said. "Yes, sir." He turned away from the screen. "That would have been Miss Luba Ardanko's room, sir?" he said.

"Right," Malone snapped. "I . . . wait a minute. Would have been?"

"That's correct, sir," the operator said. "She checked out, sir, early this morning. The room is unoccupied."

Malone swallowed hard. It was all true, then. Sir Lewis' note hadn't simply been one last wave of the red cape before an angry bull. Luba was one of them.

Miss Ardanko, he corrected himself savagely.

"What time?" he said.

The operator consulted an information board before him. "Approximately one o'clock, sir," he said.

"In the morning?"

"Yes, sir," the clerk said.

Malone closed his eyes. "Thanks," he said.

"You're quite welcome, sir," the operator said. "A courtesy of the Great Universal Ho—"

Malone cut him off. "Ho, indeed," he said bitterly. "Not to mention ha and hee—hee and yippe-ki-yay. A great life." He whisked himself back to New York in a dismal, rainy state of mind. As he sat down again to the books and papers the door to the room opened.

"You still here?" the agent-in-charge said. "I'm just going off duty

and I came by to check. Don't you ever sleep?"

"I'm on vacation, remember?"

"Some vacation," the a-in-c said. "If you're on special assignment why not tell the rest of us?"

"I want it to be a surprise," Malone said. "And meantime, I'd appreciate it if I were left entirely to my own devices."

"Still conjuring up ghosts?" the a-in-c said.

"That," Malone said, "I don't know. I've got some long-distance calls to make."

He started with the overseas calls, leaving the rest of the United States time for the sun to get round to them. His first call, which involved a lot of cursing on Malone's part and much hard work for the operator, who claimed plaintively that *she* didn't know how things had gotten so snarled up, but overseas calls were getting worse and worse, went to New Scotland Yard in London. After great difficulty, Malone managed to get Assistant Commissioner C. E. Teal, who promised to check on the inquiry at once.

It seemed like years before he called back, and Malone leaped to the phone.

"Yes?" he said.

Teal, red-faced and apparently masticating a stick of gum, said: "I got C. I. D. Commander Gideon to follow up on that matter, Mr. Malone. As you know, it's after noon here—"

"And they're all out to lunch," Malone said.

"As a matter of fact," Teal went on, "they seem to have disappeared entirely. On vacation, that sort of thing. It is rather difficult attempting any full-scale tracing job just now; our men are terribly overworked. I imagine you've had reports from the New Scotland Yard representatives working with you there—"

"Oh, certainly," Malone said. "But the hour; what does that have to do with anything?"

"I'm afraid I was thinking of our Inspector Ottermole," Teal said. "He was sent to locate Dr. Carnacki, President of the Psychical Research Society here. On being told that Dr. Carnacki was 'out to lunch,' Ottermole investigated every restaurant and eating-place within ten blocks of the offices. Dr. Carnacki was not present; he, like the rest of the Society here, appears to have left for places unknown."

"Thorough work," Malone said.

"Ottermole's a good man," Teal said. "We've checked as quickly as possible, Mr. Malone. I would like to ask you a question in return."

"Ask away," Malone said.

Teal looked worried. "Do you people think this may have anything to do with the present . . . ah . . . trouble?" he said. "Things are quite upset here, as you know; so many members of Parliament have resigned or . . . ah . . . died that the realm is being run by a rather shakily assembled coalition government. There is even some talk of giving executive power to Her Majesty until a general election can be held."

For one brief moment, Malone thought Teal was talking about Rose Thompson. Then he recalled Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, and felt better. Things weren't quite as bad as he'd thought.

But they were bad enough. "We simply don't know yet," he said untruthfully. "But as soon as anything definite comes up, of course, you'll be informed."

"Thank you, Mr. Malone," Teal said. "Of course, we'll do the same." And then, still masticating, he switched off.

Paris was next, then Rome, Berlin and a couple more. Every one had the same result. From Maigret of the Paris Sureté to Poirot in Belgium, from Berlin's strict officialdom to the cheerful Hollanders, all the reports were identical. The PRS of each country had gone underground.

Malone buried his face in his hands, thought about a cigar and decided that even a cigar might make him feel worse. Where were they? What were they doing now? What did they plan to do?

Where had they gone?

"Out of the everywhere," he heard himself say in a hollow, sepulchral voice, "into the here."

But where was the here?

He tried to make up his mind whether or not that made sense. Superficially, it sounded like extremely bad English, but he wasn't sure of anything any more. Things were getting much too confused.

He closed his eyes wearily, and vanished.

When he opened them, he was in his Washington apartment. He went over to the big couch and sat down, feeling that if he were going to curse he might as well be comfortable while he did it. But, some minutes later, when the air was a bright electric blue around him, he didn't feel any better. Cursing was not the answer.

Nothing seemed to be.

What was his next move?

Where did he go from here?

The more he thought about it, the more his mind spun. He was; he realized, at an absolute, total dead end.

Oh, there were things he could do. Malóne knew that very well. He could make a lot of noise and go through a lot of waste motion; that was what it amounted to. He could have all the homes of all the missing PRS members checked somehow. That would undoubtedly result in the startling discovery that the PRS members involved weren't home. He could have their dossiers sent to him, which would clutter everything with a great many more pieces of paper. But he felt quite sure that the pieces of paper would do no good at all. In general, he could raise all hell—and find nothing whatever.

Now, he told himself sadly, he had the evidence to start the FBI in motion. The only trouble was that he could think of nowhere for them to go.

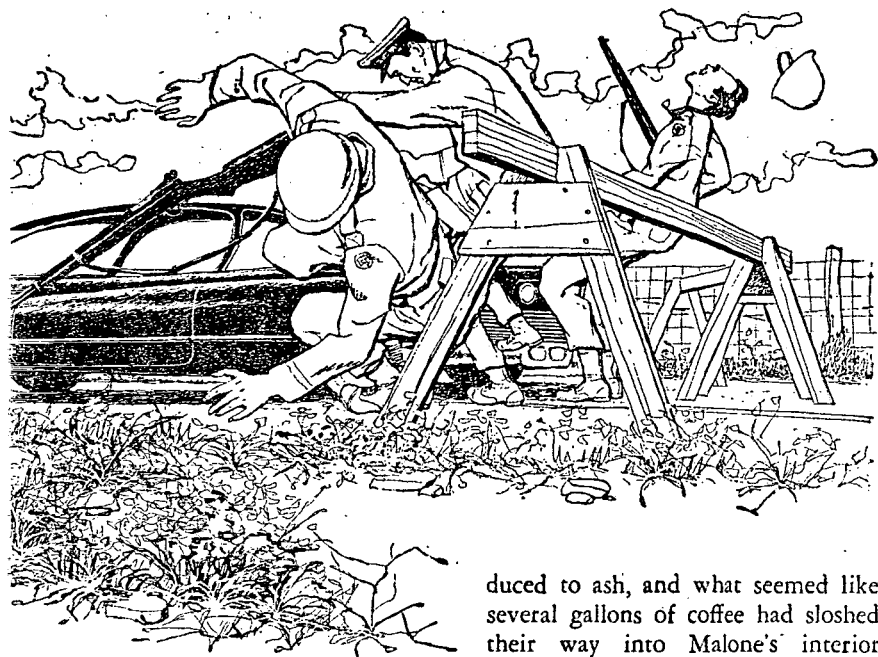
And, though he had evidence that might convince Burris—the PRS members, after all, *had* done a rather unusual fadeout—he had nowhere



near enough to carry the case into court, much less make a try at getting the case to stand up once carried in. That was one thing he couldn't do, he realized, he couldn't issue warrants for the arrest of anybody at all.

But, vacation or no vacation, he thought solemnly, he was an FBI Agent, and his motto was: "There's always a way." No normal method of tracking down the PRS members, or finding their present whereabouts, was going to work. They'd been covering themselves for such an emergency, undoubtedly; for a good many years—and if anyone got close, a burst of mental energy was quite enough to turn the seeker aside.

Nobody, Malóne told himself



grimly, was perfect. There were clues lying around somewhere; he was sure of that. There had to be. The problem was simply to figure out where to look, and how to look, and what to look for.

Somewhere, the clues were sitting quietly and waiting for him to find them. The thought cheered him slightly, but not very much. He stood up slowly and went into the kitchen to start heating water for coffee. There was, he told himself, a long night ahead of him. He sighed gently. But there was no help for it; the work had to be done—and done quickly.

But when eight cigars had been re-

duced to ash, and what seemed like several gallons of coffee had sloshed their way into Malone's interior workings, his mind was as blank as a baby's. The lovely, opalescent dawn began to show in the East, and Malone rendered it some extremely rude words. Then, haggard, red-eyed, confused, violently angry, and not one inch closer to a solution, he fell into a fitful doze on his couch.

When he awoke, the sun was high in the sky, and outside his window the cheerful sound of too much traffic floated in the air. Downstairs somebody was playing a television set too loudly, and the voice reached Malone's semiaware mind in a great tinny shout:

"The President, taking action on the current crisis, has declared martial law throughout the nation," a

voice said in an important-sounded monotone. "Exempt from this proclamation are members of the Armed Services, Special Agents and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The proclamation, issued this morning, was made public in a special news conference which—"

Malone ripped out a particularly foul oath and sat up on the couch. "That," he muttered, "is a fine thing to wake up to." He focused his eyes, with only slight difficulty, on his watch. The time was a little after two.

"Later developments will be reported as and when they occur," the announcer was saying, "and in one hour a special panel of newscasters will be assembled here to discuss this latest action in the light of present happenings. Any special rules and regulations will be broadcast over this station—"

"Shut up," Malone said. He had wasted a lot of time doing nothing but sleeping, he told himself. This was no time to be listening to television. He got up and found, to his vague surprise, that he felt a lot better and clearer-headed than he had been. Maybe the sleep had actually done him some good.

He yawned, blinked and stretched, and then padded into the bathroom for a shower and shave. After he'd changed he thought about a morning or afternoon cup of coffee, but last night's dregs appeared to have taken up permanent residence in his digestive tract, and he decided against it at last. He swallowed some orange

juice and toast and then, heaving a great sigh of resignation and brushing crumbs off his shirt, he teleported himself over to his office.

Now he knew that, sooner or later, he was going to have to talk to Burris. Burris *had* to know, even if there was nothing to be done.

And now was just as good—or as bad—a time as any.

He didn't hesitate. He punched the button on his intercom for Burris' office and then sat back, with his eyes closed, waiting for the well-known voice.

It didn't come.

Instead, Wolf, the Director's secretary, spoke up.

"Burris isn't in, Malone," he said. "He had to fly to Miami. I can get a call through to him on the plane, if it's urgent, but he'll be landing in about fifteen minutes. And he did say he'd call in this afternoon."

"Oh," Malone said. "Sure. O.K. It isn't urgent." He was just as glad of the reprieve; it gave him one more chance to work matters through to a solution, and hand it to Burris on a silver platter. "But why Miami?" he added.

"Don't you hear about anything any more?" Wolf asked.

"I've been on vacation."

"Oh," Wolf said. "Well, the Governor of Mississippi was assassinated yesterday, at Miami Beach."

"Ah," Malone said. He thought about it for a second. "Frankly," he said, "this does not strike me as an irreparable loss to the nation. Not even to Mississippi."

"You express my views precisely," Wolf said.

"How about the killer?" Malone said. "I gather they haven't got him yet, or Burris wouldn't be on his way down."

"No," Wolf said. "The killer would be on his way here instead. But you know how things are—everything's confused. Governor Flarion was walking along Collins Avenue when somebody fired at him, using a high-powered rifle with, I guess, a scope sight."

"Professional," Malone commented.

"It looks like it," Wolf said. "And he picked the right time for it, too—the way things are he was just one more confusion among the rest. Nobody even heard the sniper's shot; the governor just fell over, right there in the street. And by the time his bodyguards found out what had happened, it was impossible even to be sure just which way he was facing when the shot had been fired."

"And as I remember Collins Avenue—" Malone started.

"Right," Wolf said. "But it's even worse now, with everything going nuts. Out where Governor Flarion was taking his stroll, there's an awful lot of it to search. The boys are trying to find somebody who saw a man acting suspicious in any of the nearby buildings, or heard a shot, or saw anybody at all lurking or loitering anywhere near to the scene."

"Lovely," Malone said. "Sounds like a nice complicated job."

"You don't know the half of it,"

Wolf said. "There's also the Miami Beach Chamber of Commerce. According to them, Flarion died of a heart attack, and not even in Miami Beach. Everything happening down there isn't happening, according to them; Miami Beach is the one unsullied beauty spot in a mixed-up United States."

"All I can say," Malone offered, "is good luck. This is the saddest day in American history since the assassination of Huey P. Long."

"Agreed," Wolf said. "Want me to tell Burris you called?"

"Right," Malone said, and switched off.

The assassination of Nemours P. Flarion, he told himself, obviously meant something. It pointed straight toward some entirely new kind of answer. Granted, old Nemours P. had been a horrible mistake, a paranoid, self-centered, would-be, dictator whose final act was quite in keeping with the rest of his official life. Who else would be in Miami Beach, far away from his home state, while the President was declaring nationwide martial law?

But that, Malone told himself, wasn't the point. Or not quite the point, anyhow.

Maybe some work would dig up more facts. Anyhow, Malone was reasonably sure that he could reassign himself from vacation time, at least until he called Burris. And he had work to do; nobody was going to hand him anything on a silver serving salver.

He punched the intercom again and got the Records office.

"Yes, sir?" a familiar voice said.

"Potter," Malone said, "this is Malone. I want facsimiles of everything we have on the Psychical Research Society, on Sir Lewis Carter, and on Luba Ardanko. Both of these last are connected with the Society."

"You're back on duty, Malone?" Potter said.

"Right," Malone said. "Make that fast, will you?"

Potter nodded. "Right away," he said.

It didn't take long for the facsimile records to arrive, and Malone went right to work on them. Maybe somewhere in those records was the clue he had desperately needed. Where was the PRS? What were they doing now? What did they plan to do?

And why had they started the whole row in the first place?

The PRS, he saw, was even more widely spread than he had thought. It had branches in almost every major city in the United States, in Europe, South Africa, South America and Australia. There was even a small branch society in Greenland. True, the Communist disapproval of such nonmaterialistic, un-Marxian objectives as Psychical Research showed up in the fact that there were no registered branches in the Sino-Soviet bloc. But that, Malone thought, hardly mattered. Maybe in Russia they called themselves the Lenin Study Group, or the Better Borsch League. He was fairly sure, from all

the evidence, that the PRS had some kind of organization even behind the Iron Curtain.

Money backing didn't seem to be much of a problem, either. Malone checked for the supporters of the organization and found a microfilmed list that ran into the hundreds of thousands of names, most of them ordinary people who seemed to be interested in spiritualism and the like, and who donated a few dollars apiece to the PRS. Besides this mass of small donations, of course, there were a few large ones, from independently wealthy men who gave support to the organization and seemed actively interested in its aims.

It wasn't an unusual picture; just an exceptionally big one.

Malone sighed and went on to the personal dossiers.

Sir Lewis Carter himself was a well-known astronomer and mathematician. He was a Fellow of the Royal Society, the Royal Astronomical Society and the Royal Mathematical Society. He had been knighted for his contributions in higher mathematics only two years before he had come to live in the United States. Malone went over the papers dealing with his entry into the country carefully, but they were all in order and they contained absolutely nothing in the way of usable clues.

Sir Lewis' books on political and historical philosophy had been well-received, and he had also written a novel, "But Some Are More Equal," which, for a few weeks after publication, had managed to claw its way

to the bottom of the best-seller list.

And that was that. Malone tried to figure out whether all this information did him any good, and the answer came very quickly. The answer was no. He opened the second dossier.

Luba Ardanko had been born in New York. Her mother had been a woman of Irish descent named Mary Foley, and had died in '69. Her father had been a Hungarian named Chris Yorgen Ardanko, and had died in the same year.

Malone sighed. Somewhere in the dossiers, he was sure, there was a clue, the basic clue that would tell him everything he needed to know. His prescience had never been so strong; he knew perfectly well that he was staring at the biggest, most startling and most complete disclosure of all. And he couldn't see it.

He stared at the folders for a long minute. What did they tell him? What was the clue.

And then, very slowly, the soft light of a prodigal sun illuminated his mind.

"Mr. Malone," Malone said gently, "you are a damned fool. There are times when it is necessary to discard the impossible after you have seen that the obscure is the obvious."

He wasn't sure whether that meant anything, or even whether he knew what he was saying. But, as the entire structure of facts became clear, and then turned right upside down in his mind and changed into something else entirely—something that told him not only who, and where, but al-

so why, he became absolutely sure of one thing.

He knew the final answer.

And it *was* obvious. Obvious as all hell!

XIV

There was, of course, only one thing to do and only one place to go. Malone teleported to the New York offices of the FBI and went immediately downstairs to the garage, where a specially-built Lincoln awaited him at all times.

One of the mechanics looked up curiously as Malone headed for the car. "Want a driver?" he said.

Malone thanked his lucky stars that he didn't have to get into any lengthy and time-consuming argument about whether or not he was on vacation. "No, thanks," he said. "This is a solo job."

That, he told himself, was for sure. He drove out onto the streets and into the heavy late-afternoon traffic of New York. The Lincoln handled smoothly, but Malone didn't press his luck in the traffic which he thought was even worse than the mess he'd driven through with the happy cab driver two days before. He wasn't in any hurry now, after all. He had all the time in the world, and he knew it. They—and, for once, Malone could put real names to that "they"—would still be waiting for him when he got there.

If he got there, he thought suddenly, turning a corner and being confronted with a great mass of auto-

mobiles wedged solidly fender to fender as far as the eye could see. The noise of honking horns was deafening, and great clouds of smoke rose up to make the scene look like the circle of Hell devoted to hot-rod drivers. Malone cursed and sweated until the line began to move, and then cursed and sweated some more until he was out of the city at last.

It took quite a lot of time. New York traffic, in the past forty-eight hours, hadn't gotten better; it had gotten a lot worse. He was nearly exhausted by the time he finally crossed the George Washington Bridge and headed west. And, while he drove, he began to let his reflexes take over most of the automotive problems now that New York City was behind him.

He took all his thoughts from behind the shield that had sheltered them and arrayed them neatly before him. They were beamed, he told himself firmly, to one particular group of persons and to no one else. Everything was perfectly clear; all he had to do now was explain it.

Malone had wondered, over the years, about the detectives in books. They always managed to wrap everything up in the last chapter, which was perfectly all right by itself. But they always had a whole crowd of suspects listening to them, too. Malone knew perfectly well that he could never manage a setup like that. People would interrupt him. Things would happen. Two dogs would rush in and start a battle royal on the floor. There would be an earthquake or an invasion of little green Venus-

ians, or else somebody would just decide to faint and cause a furor.

But now, at long last, he realized, he had his chance. Nobody could interrupt him. And he could explain to his heart's content.

Because the members of the PRS were telepathic. And Kenneth J. Malone, he thought happily, was not.

Luba, he was sure, would be tuned in on him as he drove toward their Pennsylvania hiding place. At least, he wanted to think so; it made things much more pleasant. And he hoped that Luba, or whoever was really tuned in, would alert everybody else, so they could all hook in and hear his grand final explanation of everything.

He opened his mind in that one special direction, beaming his thoughts to nobody else but the group he'd decided on: A second of silence passed.

And then a sound began. Malone had passed a company of soldiers some yards back, but he hadn't noticed them particularly; with the country under martial law, soldiers were going to be as common as tree frogs. Now, however, something different was happening.

Malone felt the car tremble slightly, and stopped. Past him, rolling along the side of the highway he was on, came a parade of thirty-ton tanks. They rumbled and roared their slow, elephantine way down the highway and, after what seemed about three days, disappeared from sight. Malone wondered what the tanks were for, and then dismissed it from his mind. It certainly wasn't very pleasant to

think about, no matter how necessary it turned out to be.

He started up again. There were few cars on the road, although a lot of them were parked along the sides. A series of *Closed* signs on filling stations explained that, and Malone began to be grateful for the national emergency. It allowed him to drive without much interference, anyhow.

And a hearty good afternoon to all, he thought—especially to Miss Luba Ardanko. I hope she's tuned in . . . and, if she isn't, I hope somebody alerts her. Frankly, I'd rather talk to her than to anyone else I can think of at the moment. As a matter of fact, it's a little easier to concentrate if I talk out loud, so I think I'll do that.

He swerved the car at this point, neatly avoiding a broken wooden crate that crouched in wait for him. "Road hog," he told it bitterly, and went on.

"Nothing personal," he went on after a second. "I don't care if you're all listening in, as a matter of fact. And I'm not going to hide anything." He thought a second, and then added: "Frankly, I'm not sure I've got anything to hide."

He paused and, in his imagination, he could almost hear Luba's voice.

I'm listening, Kenneth, she said. Go on.

He fished around in his mind for a second, wondering exactly where to start. Then he decided, in the best traditions of the detective story, not to mention "Alice in Wonderland," to start at the beginning.

"The dear old Psychical Research Society," he said, speaking earnestly to his windshield, "has been going on for a good many years now—since the 1880's, as a matter of fact. That's a long time and it adds up to a lot of Psychical Research. A lot of famous and intelligent people have belonged to the Society. And, with all that, it's hardly surprising that, after nearly a hundred years of work, something finally turned up."

At this point, there was another interruption. A couple of sawhorses blocked the road ahead of Malone. As he stared at them, he felt his prescience begin to itch. He took out his .44 Magnum and slowed the car, memorizing the road as he passed it. He stopped the car before the sawhorses. Three enlisted men carrying M-1 rifles, and a stern, pale captain, his bars pointing sideways and glittering on his shoulders, appeared from the sides of the road.

The captain's voice was a military bark. "Out of the car!"

Malone began to obey.

"With your hands up!" the captain snapped. Malone dropped the .44 unobtrusively into his jacket pocket and complied. Then, as he came out of the car, he teleported himself back to a section of the road he'd memorized, ten feet behind the car. The four men were gaping, dumfounded, as Malone drew his gun and shot them. Then he removed the sawhorses, got back in his car, reloaded the .44, put it back in his holster and drove on.

"Now," he said in a thoughtful tone. "Where was I?"

He imagined Luba's voice saying: *You were telling us how, all this time, it's hardly surprising—*

"Oh, yes," he said. "Well, then. So you solved some of the problems, you'd set. You learned how to use and control telepathy and teleportation, maybe, long before scientific boys like Dr. O'Connor became interested. But you never announced it publicly. You kept the knowledge all to yourself. Is this what the common folk call telepathy, Lord Bromley?" "Yes, Lady Bromley." "Much too good for them, isn't it?" And maybe it is, at that; I don't know."

His thoughts, he recognized, were veering slightly. After a second he got back on the track.

"At any rate," he went on, "you—all of you out there—are responsible for what's happening to this country and all of Europe and Asia—and, for all I know, the suburbs of Hell.

"I remember one of the book facsimiles you got for me, for instance," he said. "The writer tried for an 'expose' of the Society, in which he attempted to prove that Sir Lewis Carter and certain other members were trying to take over the world and run it to suit themselves, using their psionic powers to institute a rather horrible type of dictatorship over the world.

"It was a pretty convincing book in a lot of ways. The author evidently knew a lot about what he was dealing with."

At this point, Malone ran into another roadblock. There had been a

fight of some kind up ahead, and a lot of cars with what looked like shell-holes in them were piled on one side of the road. The State Police were working under the confused direction of an Army major to straighten things out, while a bulldozer pushed the cars off the road onto the grass bordering it. The major stopped what he was doing and came to meet Malone as the car stopped.

"Get off the road," the major said surlily.

Malone looked up at him. "I've got some identification here," he said. "Mind if I get it out?"

The major reached for a gun and held it. "Go ahead," he said. "Don't try anything funny. It's been hell up and down this road, mister."

Malone flipped out his wallet and showed the identification.

"FBI?" the Major said. "What're you doing out here?"

"Special assignment," Malone said. "Oh . . . by the way . . . you might send some men back a ways. There are four dead men in military uniforms lying on the road near a couple of sawhorses."

The major stared. "Dead?" he said at last. "Dead how?"

"I shot them," Malone said.

"You—" The major's finger tightened on the trigger of his gun.

"Now, wait a minute," Malone said. "I said they were in military uniforms. I didn't say they were soldiers."

"But—"

"Three enlisted men carrying M-1 rifles?" Malone said. "When the M-1's out of date? And a captain with his

bars on sideways? No, major. Those were renegades. Looters of some kind; they wanted to kill me and get the car and any valuables I happened to have."

The major, very slowly, relaxed his grip on the gun and his arm fell to his side. "You did the smart thing, Mr. Malone," he said.

"And I've got to go on doing it," Malone said. "I'm in a hurry."

He noticed a newspaper fluttering at the side of the road, not too near the cars. Somehow it made everything seem even more lonely and strange. The headlines fluttered into sight:

**MARTIAL LAW EDICT
"MUST BE OBEYED," SAYS
GOVERNOR**

But Riots Are Feared In Outlying Towns

**MAN AND WIFE CONFESS
KILLING OF RELATIVES
ABOARD PRIVATE PLANE:**

Force Kin To Drop Off

There was a photo of a woman there, too, and Malone could read just a little of the caption:

"Obeying the edict of martial law laid down by the President, Miss Helen A.—"

He wondered vaguely if her last name were Handbasket.

The major was looking at him. "O.K., then," he said.

"I can go on?" Malone said.

The major looked stern. "Drive on," he said.

Malone got the car going; the roadblock was lifted for him and he went on by.

After a moment, he said: "Pardon the interruption. I trust that all the devoted listeners to Uncle Kenneth's Happy Hour are still tuned in."

Go ahead, said Lou's voice.

"All right, let's take a look at what you've been doing. You've caused people to change their minds about what they've been intending to do. You can cause all sorts of hell to break loose that way. You have a lot of people you want to get rid of, so you play on their neuroses and concoct errors for them to fight. You rig things so that they quit, or get fired, or lose elections, or get arrested, or just generally get put out of circulation. Some of the less stable ones just up and did away with themselves.

"Sometimes, it's individuals who have to go. Sometimes, it's whole groups or maybe even whole nations. And sometimes it's in between, and you manage to foul up organizational moves with misplaced papers, mis-sent messages, errors, changed minds, and everything else you can think of.

"You know," he went on, "at first I couldn't see any pattern in what was going on—though I remember telling myself that there was a kind of justice in the way this thing was just as hard on gangsters as it was on businessmen and Congressmen.

"The Congressman from Gahoochie County, Arkansas, gets himself in a jam over fraudulent election returns on the same day that the accountant for the Truckers Union sends Mike Sands' books to the Attorney General. Simple justice, I call it.

"And, you know, seen from that viewpoint, this whole caper might come out looking pretty good. If most of the characters you've taken care of are just the boys who needed taking care of, I'd say more power to you—except for one thing. It's all right to get rid of all the fools, idiots, maniacs, blockheads, morons, psychopaths, paranoids, timidity-ridden, fear-worshippers, fanatics, thieves, and the rest of the general, all-round, no-good characters; I'm all for it. But not this way. Oh, no.

"You've pressed the panic button, that's what you've done.

"You've done more damage in two weeks than all those fumblebrains have been able to do in several myriads of lifetimes. You've loused up the economy of this nation and every other civilized nation. You've caused riots in which innocent people have died; you've caused thousands more to lose their businesses and their savings. And only God Himself knows how many more are going to die of starvation and murder before this thing is over.

"And you can't tell me that *all* of those people deserve to die."

He slowed down as he came to a small town, and for the first time in many miles he focused on the road ahead with his full mind. The town, he saw, looked like a shambles. There were four cars tastefully arranged on the lawn of what appeared to be the local library. Across the street, a large drugstore was in flames, and surprised people were hurrying to put it out. There didn't seem to be any

State Police or Army men around, but they'd passed through; Malone saw a forgotten overseas cap lying on the road ahead.

With a shock, he realized that he was now in Pennsylvania, close to where he wanted to go. A signboard told him that the town he was looking at was Milford. It was a mess, and Malone hoped fervently that it was a mess that could eventually be cleaned up.

The town was a small one, and Malone was glad to get out of it so quickly.

"That's the kind of thing I mean," he said aloud. Then he paused. "Are you there, anybody?"

He imagined he heard Luba's voice saying: *Yes, Ken. Yes, I'm here. Listening to you.*

Imagination was fine but, of course, there was no way for them to get through to him. They were telepathic, but Kenneth J. Malone, he told himself sadly, was not.

"Hello, out there," he went on. "I hope you've been listening so far, because there isn't too much more for me to say.

"Just this: you've wrecked my country, and you've wrecked almost all of the rest of civilization. You've brought my world down around my ears.

"I have every logical reason to hate your guts. By all the evidence I have, you are a group of the worst blackguards who ever existed; by all the evidence, I should be doing everything in my power to exterminate you.

"But I'm not.

"My prescience tells me that what you've been doing is right and necessary. I'm damned if I can see it, but there it is. I just hope you can explain it to me."

XV

Soon, he was in the midst of the countryside. It was, of course, filled with country. It spread around him in the shape of hills, birds, trees, flowers, grass, billboards and other distractions to the passing motorist.

It took Malone better than two hours more to find the place he was looking for. Long before he found it, he had come to the conclusion that finding country estates in Pennsylvania was only a shade easier than finding private homes in the Borough of Brooklyn. In both cases, he had

found himself saddled with the same frantic search down what seemed likely routes which turned out to lead nowhere. He had found, in both cases, complete ignorance of the place on the part of local citizens, and even strong doubts that the place could possibly have any sort of existence.

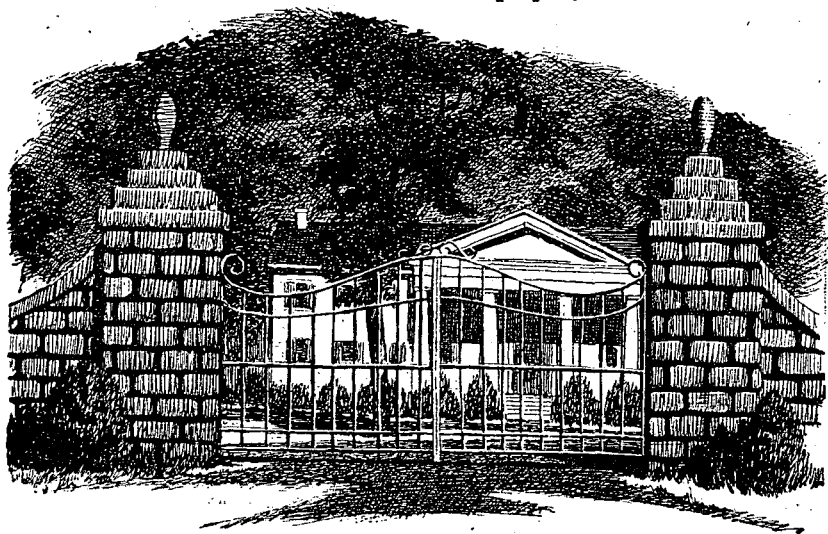
The fact that it was growing dark didn't help much, either.

But he found it at last. Rounding a curve in a narrow, blacktop road, he saw the home behind a grove of trees.

He recognized it instantly.

He had seen it so often that he felt as if he knew it intimately.

It was a big, rambling, Colonial-type mansion, painted a blinding and beautiful white, with a broad, pillared porch and a great carved front door. The front windows were curtained in rich purples, and before the house



was a great front garden, and tall old trees. Malone half-expected Scarlett O'Hara to come tripping out of the house at any minute shouting: "Rhett! The children's mush is on fire!" or something equally inappropriate.

Inside it, however, if Malone were right, was not the magnetic Scarlett. Inside the house were some of the most important members of the PRS—and one person who was not a member.

But it was impossible to tell from the outside. Nothing moved on the well-kept grounds, and the windows didn't show so much as the flutter of a purple curtain. There was no sound. No cars were parked around the house—nor, Malone realized, thinking of "Gone With the Wind," were there any horses or carriages.

The place looked deserted.

Malone thought he knew better, but it took a few minutes for him to get up enough courage to go up the long driveway. He stared at the house. It was an old one, he knew, built long before the Civil War and originally commanding a huge track of land. Now, all that remained of the vast acreage was the small portion that surrounded the house.

But the original family still inhabited it, proud of the house and of their part in its past. Over the years, Malone knew, they had kept it up scrupulously, and the place had been both restored and modernized on the inside without harming the classic outlines of the hundred-and-fifty-year-old structure.

A fence surrounded the estate, but the front gate was swinging open. Malone saw it and took a deep breath. Now, he told himself, or never. He drove the Lincoln through the opening slowly, alert for almost anything.

There was no disturbance. Thirty yards from the front door he pulled the car to a cautious stop and got out. He started to walk toward the building. Each step seemed to take whole minutes, and everything he had thought raced through his mind again. Nothing seemed to move anywhere, except Malone himself.

Was he right? Were the people he'd been beaming to really here? Or had he been led astray by them? Had he been manipulated, in spite of his shield, as easily as they had manipulated so many others?

That was possible. But it wasn't the only possibility.

Suppose, he thought, that he was perfectly right, and that the group was waiting inside. And suppose, too, that he'd misunderstood their motives.

Suppose they were just waiting for him to get a little closer.

Malone kept walking. In just a few steps, he could be close enough so that a bullet aimed at him from the house hadn't a real chance of missing him.

And it didn't have to be bullets, either. They might have set a trap, he thought, and were waiting for him to walk into it. Then they would hold him prisoner while they devised ways to . . .

To what?

He didn't know. And that was even worse; it called up horrible terrors from the darkest depths of Malone's mind. He continued to walk forward.

Finally he reached the steps that led up to the porch, and took them one at a time.

He stood on the porch. A long second passed.

He took a step toward the high, wide and handsome oaken door. Then he took another step, and another.

What was waiting for him inside?

He took a deep breath, and pressed the doorbell button.

The door swung open immediately, and Malone involuntarily stepped back.

The owner of the house smiled at him from the doorway. Malone let out his breath in one long sigh of relief.

"I was hoping it would be you," he said weakly. "May I come in?"

"Why, certainly, Malone. Come on in. We've been expecting you, you know," said Andrew J. Burris, Director of the FBI.

XVI

Malone sat, quietly relaxed and almost completely at ease, in the depths of a huge, comfortable, old-fashioned Morris chair. Three similar chairs were clustered around a squat, massive coffee table, made of a single slab of dark wood set on short, curved legs. Malone looked around at the other three with a relaxed feeling of recog-

nition: Andrew J. Burris, Sir Lewis Carter and Luba Ardanko.

Sir Lewis softly exhaled a cloud of smoke as he removed the briar from his mouth. "Malone," he asked gently, "how did you know we would be here?"

"Well," Malone said, "I just . . . I mean, it was obvious as soon as I—" He stopped, frowning. "I had one thing to go on, anyway," he said. "I figured out the PRS was responsible for all the troubles because it was so efficient. And then, while I was sitting and staring at the file reports, it suddenly came to me: the FBI was just as efficient. So it was obvious."

"What was?" Burris said.

Malone shrugged. "I thought you'd been keeping me on vacation because your mind was being changed," he said. "Now I can see you were doing it of your own free will."

"Yes," Sir Lewis said. "But how did you know you'd find us *here*, Malone?"

There was a shadow in the room, but not a visible one. Malone felt the chill of sudden danger. Whatever was going to happen, he realized, he would not be around for the finish. He, Kenneth Joseph Malone, the cuddly, semi-intrepid FBI Agent he had always known and loved, would never get out of this deadly situation. If he lived, he would be so changed that—

He didn't even want to think about it.

"What sort of logic," Sir Lewis was saying, "led you to the belief that we would all be here, in Andrew's house?"

Malone forced his mind to consider the question. "Well," he began, "it isn't exactly logic, I guess."

Luba smiled at him. He felt a little reassured, but not much. "You should have phrased that differently," she said. "It's: It isn't exactly logic. I guess."

"Not guess," Sir Lewis said. "You know. Prescience, Malone. Your precognitive faculty."

"All right," Malone said. "All right. So what?"

"Take it easy," Burris put in. "Relax, Malone. Everything's going to be all right."

Sir Lewis waved a hand negligently. "Let's continue," he said. "Tell me, Malone: if you were a mathematics professor, teaching a course in calculus, how would you grade a paper that had all the answers but didn't show the work?"

"I never took calculus," Malone said. "But I imagine I'd flunk him."

"Why?" Sir Lewis said.

"Because if he can't back up his answer," Malone said slowly, "then it's no better than a layman's guess. He has to give reasons for his answers; otherwise nobody else can understand him."

"Fine," Sir Lewis said. "Perfectly fine. Now—" he puffed at his pipe—"can you give me a logical reason for arriving at the decision you made a few hours ago?"

The danger was coming closer, Malone realized. He didn't know what it was or how to guard himself against it. All he could do was answer, and play for time.

"While I was driving up here," he said, "I sent you a message. I told you what I knew and what I believed about the whole world picture as it stands now. I don't know if you received it, but I—"

Luba spoke without the trace of a smile. "You mean you didn't know?" she said. "You didn't know I was answering you?"

That was the first pebble of the avalanche, Malone knew suddenly—the avalanche that was somehow going to destroy him. "You forced your thoughts into my mind, then," he said as coolly as he could. "Just as you forced decision on the rest of society."

"Now, dammit, Malone!" Burris said suddenly. "You know those bursts take a lot of energy, and only last for a fraction of a second!"

Malone blinked. "Then you . . . didn't—"

Of course I didn't force anything on you, Kenneth. I can't. Not all the power of the entire PRS could force anything through your shield. But you opened it to me.

It was Luba's mental "voice." Malone opened his mouth, shut it and then, belatedly, snapped shut the channel through which he'd contacted her. Luba gave him a wry look, but said nothing. "You mean I'm a telepath?" Malone asked weakly.

"Certainly," Sir Lewis snapped. "At the moment, you can only pick up Luba—but you are certainly capable of picking up anyone, eventually. Just as you learned to teleport, you can learn to be a telepath. You—"

The room was whirling, but Malone tried to keep his mind steady. "Wait a minute," he said. "If you received what I sent, then you know I've got a question to ask."

There was a little silence.

Finally Sir Lewis looked up: "You want to know why you felt we—the PRS—were innocent of the crimes you want to charge us with. Very well." He paused. "We have wrecked civilization: granted. We could have done it more smoothly: granted."

"Then—"

Sir Lewis' face was serious and steady. Malone tensed.

"Malone," Sir Lewis said, "do you think you're the only one with a mental shield?"

Malone shook his head. "I guess stress—fixity of mind or purpose—could develop it in anyone," he said. "At least, in some people."

"Very well," Sir Lewis said. "Now, among the various people of the world who have, through one necessity or another, managed to develop such shields—"

Burris broke in impatiently. His words rang, and then echoed in the old house.

"Some fool," he said flatly, "was going to start the Last War."

"So you had to stop it," Malone said after a long second. "But I still don't see—"

"Of course you don't," Sir Lewis said. "But you've got to understand why you don't see it first."

"Because I'm stupid," Malone said.

Luba was shaking his head. Ma-

lone turned to face her. "Not stupid," she said. "But some people, Kenneth, have certain talents. Others have—other talents. There's no way of equating these talents; all are useful, each performs a different function."

"And my talent," Malone said, "is stupidity. But—"

She lit a cigarette daintily. "Not at all," she said. "You've done a really tremendous job, Kenneth. I was trained ever since I was a baby to use my psionic abilities—the PRS has known how to train children in that line ever since 1970. Only Mike Fueyo developed a system for instruction independently; the boy was, and is, a genius, as you've noticed."

"Agreed," Malone said. "But—"

"You, however," Luba said, "have the distinction of being the first human being who has, as an adult, achieved his full powers without childhood training. In addition, you're the only human being who has ever developed to the extent you have—in precognition, too."

She puffed on the cigarette. Malone waited.

"But what you don't have," she said at last, very carefully, "is the ability to reason out the steps you've taken, after you've reached the proper conclusion."

"Like the calculus student," Malone said. "I flunk." Something inside him grated over the marrow in his bones. It was as though someone had decided that the best cure for worry was coarse emery in the joints, and he, Kenneth J. Malone, had been picked for the first experiment.

"You're not flunking," Luba said. "You're a very long way from flunking, Kenneth."

Burris cleared his throat suddenly. Malone turned to him. The Head of the FBI stuck an unlighted cigar into his mouth, chewed it a little, and then said: "Malone, we've been keeping tabs on you. Your shield was unbreakable—but we have been able to reach the minds of people you've talked to: Mike Sands, Primo Palveri, and so on. And Her Majesty, of course: you opened up a gap in your shield to talk to her, and you haven't closed it down. Until you started broadcasting here on the way up, naturally."

"All right," Malone said, waiting with as much patience as possible for the point.

"I tried to take you off the case," Burris went on, "because Sir Lewis and the others felt you were getting too close to the truth. Which you were, Malone, which you were." He lit his cigar and looked obscurely pleased. "But they didn't know how you'd take it," he said. "They . . . we . . . felt that a man who hadn't been trained since childhood to accept the extrasensory abilities of the human mind couldn't possibly learn to accept the reality of the job the PRS has to do."

"I still don't," Malone said. "I'm stupid. I flunk. Remember?"

"Now, now," Burris said helplessly. "Not at all, Malone. But we were worried. I lied to you about those three spies—I put the drug in the water-cooler. I tried to keep you from

learning the Fueyo method of teleporration. I didn't want you to learn that you were telepathic."

"But I did," Malone said. "And what does that make me?"

"That," Sir Lewis cut in, "is what we're attempting to find out."

Malone felt suitably crushed, but he wasn't sure by what. "I've got some questions," he said after a second. "I want to know three things."

"Go ahead," Sir Lewis said.

"One:" Malone said, "How come Her Majesty and the other nutty telepaths didn't spot you? Two: How come you sent me out on these jobs when you were afraid I was dangerous? And three: What was it that was so safe about busting up civilization? How did that save us from the Last War?"

Sir Lewis nodded. "First," he said, "we've developed a technique of throwing up a shield and screening it with a surface of innocuous thoughts—like hiding behind a movie screen. Second . . . well, we had to get the jobs done, Malone. And Andrew thought you were the most capable, dangerous or not. For one thing, we wanted to get all the insane telepaths in one place; it's difficult to work when the atmosphere's full of such telepathic ravings."

"But wrecking the world because of a man with a mind-shield—why not just work things so his underlings wouldn't obey him?" Malone shook his head. "That sounds more reasonable."

"It may," Sir Lewis said. "But it wouldn't work. As a matter of fact, it

was tried, and it didn't work. You see, the Sino-Soviet top men were smart enough to see that their underlings were being tampered with. And they've developed a system, partly depending on automatic firing systems, partly on individuals with mind-blocks—that is, people who aren't being tampered with—which we can't disrupt directly. So we had to smash them."

"And the United States at the same time," Burris said. "The economic balance had to be kept; a strong America would be forced in to fill the power vacuum otherwise, and that would make for an even worse catastrophe. And if we weren't in trouble, the Sino-Soviet Bloc would blame their mess on us. And that would start the Last War before collapse could get started. Right, Malone?"

"I see," Malone said, thinking that he almost did. He told himself he could feel happy now; the danger—which hadn't been danger to him, really, but danger from him toward the PRS, toward civilization—was over. But he didn't feel happy. He didn't feel anything.

"There's a crisis building in New York," Sir Lewis said suddenly, "that's going to take all our attention. Malone, why don't you . . . well, go home and get some rest? We're going to be busy for a while, and you'll want to be fresh for the work coming up."

"Sure," Malone said listlessly. "Sure."

As the others rose, he closed his

eyes and took a deep breath. Then he vanished.

XVII

Two hours passed, somehow. Bourbon and soda helped them pass, Malone discovered; he drank two highballs slowly, trying not to think about anything. He felt terrible. After a while he made himself a third highball and started on it. Maybe this would make him feel better. Maybe he thought, he ought to break out his cigars and celebrate.

But there didn't seem to be very much to celebrate somehow. He felt like an amoeba on a slide being congratulated on having successfully conquered the world.

He drank some more bourbon-and-soda. Amoebae, he told himself, didn't drink bourbon-and-soda. He was better off than an amoeba. He was happier than an amoeba. But somehow he couldn't imagine any amoeba in the world, no matter how heartbroken, feeling any worse than Kenneth J. Malone.

He looked up. There was another amoeba in the room.

Then he frowned. She wasn't an amoeba, he thought. She was the scientist the amoeba was supposed to fall in love with, so the scientist could report on everything he did, so all the other scien—psiontists could know all about him. But whoever heard of a scien—psiontist—falling in love with an amoeba? Nobody. It was fate. And fate was awful. Malone had often suspected it, but now he was sure.

Now he was looking at things from the amoeba's side, and fate was terrible.

"No, Ken," the psionist said. "It needn't be at all like that."

"Oh, yes, it need," Malone said positively. "It need be even worse. When I have some more to drink, it'll be even worse. Wait and see."

"Ken," Luba said softly, "you don't have to suffer this way."

"No," Malone said agreeably, "I don't. You could shoot me and then I'd be dead. Just quit all this amoebing around, O.K.?"

"You're already half shot," Luba said sharply. "Now be quiet and listen. You're angry because you've fallen in love with me and you're all choked up over the futility of it all."

"Exactly," Malone said. "Ex-positively-actly. You're a psionic superman—woman. You can figure things out in your own little head instead of just getting along on dum psionic luck like us amoebae. You're too far above me."

"Ken, listen!" Luba snapped. "Look into my mind. You can link up with me: go ahead and do it. You can read me clear down to the subconscious if you want to."

Malone blinked.

"Now, Ken!" Luba said.

Malone looked. For a long time.

Half an hour later, Kenneth J. Malone, alone in his room, was humming happily to himself as he brushed a few specks of dust from the top of his best royal blue bowler. He faced the mirror on the wall, puffed on the

cigar clenched between his teeth, and adjusted the bowler to just the right angle.

There was a knock on the door. He went and opened it, carefully disposing of the cigar first. "Oh," he said. "What are you doing here?"

"Just saying hello," Thomas Boyd grinned. "Back at work?"

Boyd didn't know, of course, what had happened. Nor need he ever know. "Just about," Malone said. "Spending the evening relaxing, though."

"Hm-m-m," Boyd said. "Let me guess. Her name begins with L?"

"It does not," Malone said flatly.

"But—" Boyd began.

Malone cast about in his mind for an explanation. Telling Boyd the truth—that Luba and Kenneth J. Malone just weren't equals as far as social intercourse went—would leave him exactly nowhere. But, somehow, it had to be said. "Tom," he said, "suppose you met a beautiful girl—charming, wonderful, brilliant."

"Great," Boyd said. "I like it already."

"Suppose she looked about . . . oh . . . twenty-three," Malone went on.

"Do any more supposing," Boyd said, "and I'll be pawing the ground."

"And then," Malone said, very carefully, "suppose you found out, after you'd been out with her . . . well, when you took her out, say, you met your grandmother."

"My grandmother," Boyd said virtuously, "doesn't go to joints like that."

"Use your imagination," Malone snapped. "And suppose your grandmother recognized the girl as an old schoolmate of hers."

Boyd swallowed hard. "As a what?"

"An old schoolmate," Malone said. "Suppose this girl were so charming and everything just because she'd had . . . oh, ninety years or so to practice in."

"Malone," Boyd said in a depressed tone, "you can spoil more ideas—"

"Well," Malone said, "would you go out with her again?"

"You kidding?" Boyd said. "Of course not."

"But she's the same girl," Malone said. "You've just found out something new about her, that's all."

Boyd nodded. "So," he said, "you found out something new about Luba. Like, maybe, she's ninety years old?"

"No," Malone said. "Nothing like that. Just—something." He remembered Queen Elizabeth's theory of politeness toward superiors: people, she'd said, act as if they believed their bosses were superior to them, but they didn't believe it.

On the other hand, he thought, when a man knows and believes that someone actually *is* superior—then, he doesn't mind at all. He can depend on that superiority to help him. And love, ordinary man-and-woman love, just can't exist.

Nor, Malone told himself, would anyone want it to. It would, after all, be damned uncomfortable.

"So who's the girl?" Boyd said. "And where? The clubs are all closed, and the streets probably aren't very safe just now."

"Barbara Wilson," Malone said, "and Yucca Flats. I ought to be able to get a fast plane." He shrugged. "Or maybe telepot," he added.

"Sure," Boyd said. "But on a night with so many troubles—"

"Oh, King Henry," Malone said, "hearken. A man who looks as historical as you do ought to know a little history."

"Such as?" Boyd said, bristling slightly.

"There have always been troubles," Malone said. "In the Eighth Century, it was Saracens; in the Fourteenth, the Black Death. Then there was the Reformation, and the Prussians in 1870, and the Spanish in 1898, and —"

"And?" Boyd said.

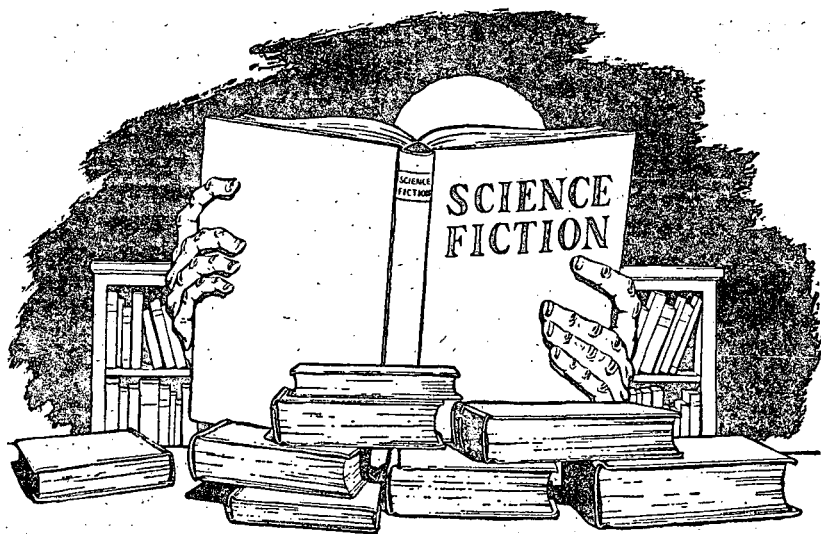
Malone took a deep breath. He could almost feel the court dress flowing over him, as the court manners did. Lady Barbara, after all, attendant to Her Majesty, would expect a certain character from him.

After a second, he had it.

"In 1914, it was enemy aliens," said Sir Kenneth Malone.

THE END

THE REFERENCE



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THREE FOR THE TELLY



IN THE summer of 1953, when American television audiences were watching "Captain Video" if they wanted science fiction, the B.B.C. was offering British "telly" watchers the first of

three real "hard-shell" SF serials—"The Quatermass Experiment." So popular did it turn out to be that two more Quatermass adventures have gone on the air, "Quatermass II" in the fall of 1955, and "Quatermass and the Pit" in December and January, 1958-'59.

As for American audiences, you may also have seen the first adventure of Professor Bernard Quatermass in

the British-made film released here as "The Creeping Unknown," with an American, Brian Donlevy, doing very well by the title role. This, in turn, is being televised on late and late, late shows . . .

Thanks to a review in the fanzine published by Dick Eney of Alexandria, Virginia, whom you may remember as the editor of the amazing "Fancyclopedia II," I have discovered that Penguin Books have published paperback editions of all three Quatermass telescripts, somewhat edited for reading. They should be in many bookstores—though probably not on newsstands or drugstore racks—for sixty-five cents each. "The Quatermass Experiment" is Penguin No. 1421; "Quatermass II" is No. 1448; and "Quatermass and the Pit," is No. 1449. The two latter titles appeared in 1960.

It also sticks in my head that "The Quatermass Experiment," or a Quatermass story of some kind, was published in *Collier's* or one of the other national magazines of the same period. I can't locate it in an index, those science-fiction encyclopedias, Ed Wood and Norman Metcalfe, are in diagonally opposite parts of the country, and anyway it will be more fun for you to point out that I'm nuts.

I said that these three books are readers' versions of the television scripts. The author says that he has eliminated technical terms and stage or camera directions to a great extent, and has made no distinction between live and filmed scenes, in the interest

of making a playable script into a readable book. That he has certainly done, especially with the first of the three adventures.

To pin down Mr. Kneale a bit more, he hails from the Isle of Man, won a Somerset Maugham Award for his short stories, "Tomato Cain," and has been a sometime actor as well as short story, television and screen writer. He scripted the B.B.C. television version of Orwell's "Nineteen Eighty-Four," which most critics found much better than the film, has done what sounds like another TV original called "The Creature," and wrote the screen plays for "Look Back in Anger" and "The Entertainer," the latter just released in the United States as I write.

To get in my knocks first, the themes of all three serials are very old-stuff—invading monsters—and they are much too much alike in consequence. In other words, British television audiences have been served up the same breed of science fiction that Hollywood has been offering in the drive-ins and neighborhood theaters. The difference is that Mr. Kneale has done his job superlatively well, and British audiences have cried for more of the same, while I am sure that even the popcornophagi—Forrest J. Ackerman's "Famous Monsters" to the contrary—must be screaming for less. If the production was as good as the writing, these three television serials must have been memorable.

Let me emphasize again that these are monster shows: not "serious"

SF, not Orwell or Wyndham or Clarke or anything else "advanced." If the structure of the books preserves the structure of the shows, each ran for six weeks—nor the traditional American thirteen, which might have stretched a good thing too thin, and not interminably. So far as cast is concerned, there was no continuity: the Quatermass of each play is different, and the only character who carries over is a more than ordinarily intelligent yellow journalist who appears in the first and third scripts. A daughter pops up as the ingénue in "Quatermass II" and vanishes again; none of the professor's colleagues survives, either, though in "II" the second professorial lead is or was taken by no lesser actor than Hugh Griffith, now well known to American audiences for his Oscar-winning Sheikh in "Ben Hur."

Professor Bernard Quatermass is head of something called the British Experimental Rocket Group. As "The Quatermass Experiment" opens, a rocket with a crew of three men is long overdue; then Australia radios that it has been sighted on its way back, after having gone a million miles out into space. It crash-lands in England, conveniently near the Group laboratories—and only one man comes out. Of the other two, nothing is left but empty spacesuits, with the men's clothing neatly in order inside.

The story is a triumph of cliff-hanging technique over old and ob-

vious material; indeed, the author makes the obvious *un*-obvious by making it plausible and carrying his readers along with him. At the end of Part I, the rocket is found to be impossibly empty; at the end of the next part, investigators find a strange jelly inside; as Part III closes, something terribly strange but still unspecified is happening to the survivor, Victor Caroon, who has just stricken a news photographer dead in a tiny kitchen. Part IV follows the man-hunt, ending as a druggist sees the monstrous growth on Caroon's hand; in Part V he has become a gigantic monster that bursts or creeps in upon a television tour of Westminster Abbey—and upon the television audience watching in their homes. In the final part, of course, all is brought to a climax of logic and action.

The theme, not long withheld, is that there is a form of life in space that can penetrate the walls of a rocket and dissolve into other life-forms, taking their shape or new shapes of its own. The missing men had been dissolved in this way, and incorporated in the survivor, Caroon; he then becomes blended with a cactus, and ends as a horrible vegetable/animal monster. But the ordinary and the horrible are played so deftly against each other in every scene and in the play as a whole, that the suspense builds intolerably.

"Quatermass II" isn't up to its predecessor, but it is still pretty good. Bureaucrats are levering Quatermass out of his Rocket Group, just as he is trying to get a colony on the

Moon. Then strange things begin falling from the sky . . . there is word of a secret government project that seemingly duplicates his own . . . and he heads off to investigate. The evidence begins to contradict itself; people in high places turn out to have a strange mark on their faces; the secret plant is very evidently not what it seems. Before the end we know that Quatermass is again up against an invasion of vaporous entities from space.

In "Quatermass and the Pit" the monsters appear out of the bowels of the Earth, but again they originate in space—allegedly on Mars. Quatermass comes in, as he did in "II," to investigate strange phenomena—the five-million-old skeletons of some kind of pre-men deep in the excavation for an office building, in a neighborhood that has been haunted for centuries. Meanwhile he has had his Rocket Group administered out from under him, so he has time to spend on the strange cylinder that is found in the bottom of the pit. The accompanying phenomena grow more and more sinister and more and more puzzling; shriveled husks of insect-like Martians are discovered inside the cylinder; poltergeistlike violence spreads over London; and eventually Hob materializes above the holocaust, to be destroyed in the final scene.

I suggest you look up these three prime examples of how a televised science-fiction serial can be written and produced to build superbly from week to week, with mystery, suspense, and every other element of a

good thriller—even with themes as old as these.

NEXT DOOR TO THE SUN, by Stanton A. Coblenz. Avalon Books, New York. 1960. 224 pp. \$2.95

As far as I can tell, this is an original story by the master of unsubtle satire; if ever published in the old days, under some very different name, it has been up-dated with current terminology and allusions. Basically, however, it is the same story the author has told over and over: human beings of our own or a sufficiently similar society find an alien society that exaggerates the flaws in our culture outlandishly.

This is actually a double-jointed job of satirization, for the two men from Earth who drop in on a "lost" colony on Mercury are strange enough in their reactions for us to see ourselves in a distorting mirror, before ever we look at the Mercurites. These good folk, living in comfort under their dome at the edge of the twilight zone, find their visitors just as peculiar as Roy Bentley and Chris Hartridge find them. More, in fact, because Chris' red hair makes a pariah of him—a "Koskuff," automatically ignored, like a bad child, until one simply has to throw the brat out.

The plot is straightforwardly formula: through a mixture of stupidity, wilfulness and honest errors, the aliens from Earth manage to throw the peculiarly balanced Mercurite so-

cial order into revolution, then escape with their lives—though without their girl friends. Every point is underlined repeatedly. It's just too clumsy for modern standards, even though *L'il Abner* and *Pogo* are every bit as heavy-handed in their satire at times.

LORDS OF ATLANTIS, by Wallace West. Avalon Books, New York. 1960. 220 pp. \$2.95

This yarn from a 1952 *Startling*—I think—is practically the epitome of Atlantis stories. What saves it is the author's humor—not overt slapstick, but the wry twist to a point of view that keeps slipping in to show that he doesn't take the thing any more seriously than the reader should.

In this version of the past, Atlantis is a Martian colony at the bottom of the eastern basin of the Mediterranean, then dry and protected by a dam at the Straits of Gibraltar. The gods and goddesses of Greek mythology are officials and socialites in the Atlantean hierarchy, or in native kingdoms under Martian domination. Pandora, for example, is Pan Doh Ra, daughter of the Egyptian emperor Plu Toh Ra; Bab-El is a nuclear power station. Only the half-Martian hero, Teraf, and his brother Refo, king of Hellas, have distinctly un-Greek names in spite of being the only Greeks present.

In this setting and with these assumptions a standard melodrama of

court intrigue and barbarian revolt is played out, with the added menace of an approaching comet as heavy as the Earth that adds cataclysm to battle in the final hurly-burly.

Wallace West is a good story teller, and I can only hope he tries his hand at a little more demanding situation some time.

FIRST MEN TO THE MOON, by Wernher von Braun. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York. 1960. 96 pp. \$3.95

This thin hybrid—it might be called a "documentary" if it were a film—belongs in secondary and even elementary school libraries. It offers very little to adult readers who have any knowledge of science fiction at all.

Technically impeccable, of course, considering the author's knowledge, this is the oldest-fashioned of rocket-to-the-Moon stories. The heroes go through the traditional suffering; they have a moment's panic as their power supply seems to have failed—though this is all a mistake, so there isn't even the suspense of finding a real broken connection; they land, explore, collect; they are hit by a meteor; they make it home. The serialized version in *This Week*, the Sunday newspaper supplement, has been expanded and technical detail added—that's all.

However, something has been done to make the book unusual and interesting. Wide margins are left,

and in them have been inserted straight factual discussions and diagrams amplifying the scientific points in the story. This combination of fiction and factual side-notes should help teachers, if it doesn't add a thrill for the kids.

THE WATERS OF KRONOS, by Conrad Richter. Alfred A. Knopf, New York. 1960. 176 pp. \$3.50

Call this fantasy—call it anything you like—but it is built around the key element of time travel: a present-day man's visit to another time, which he sees through the eyes of his own culture and background.

Here an old man, John Donner, returns to the village of his boyhood, in the hills of eastern Pennsylvania. But Unionville is under hundreds of feet of water, and even the dead are no longer in their graves. Then, somehow, he is back in the town of his early memories, on the eve of his grandfather's funeral, vainly trying to find someone who will see the boy of half a century and more before in the dirty old stranger with the queer clothes and queerer money . . . someone who can answer a question that has haunted him down the years. One by one they reject him: his aunts, his father, himself as a boy. And then he gets his answer, in a way that confirms his nightmare as a true passage through time.

Conrad Richter is an accomplished novelist, who here is writing on level

beyond level, deep with symbolism and with the basic fears of men like John Donner. He recreates a time and place that only old men remember now—but he does it as a time traveler sees it, not as an exercise in memory.

LOST RACE OF MARS, by Robert Silverberg. John C. Winston Co., Philadelphia. 1960. 120 pp. \$2.95.

STADIUM BEYOND THE STARS, by Milton Lesser. John C. Winston Co., Philadelphia. 1960. 206 pp. \$2.50

These two books represent Winston's program of junior science fiction on two levels: for youngsters eight to twelve, and for young adults. For good measure, the former is the first children's book by an experienced science-fiction writer, Robert Silverberg. The latter is the latest in a series that now numbers thirty-one books, some very good.

"Lost Race of Mars" gives us a standard enough plot: two children go with their father, a scientist, to look for traces of the Old Martians who may still survive on the red planet. The people of the Mars Colony rather resent the Earthlings whom they must feed for a year, and when the children do find a Martian where none is supposed to be, the hostility reaches a peak. But, juvenile ingenuity finds a way out.

I hope that Bob Silverberg continues to do science fiction for chil-

dren of this age group, and that his editors will let him put into future stories a good deal more of the realism of which he is capable. Ten-year-olds, in particular, are among the most curious, probing creatures in the universe, and they will want to know in far more detail than this book tells them how it feels to be in space, to live on Mars, to have strange pets and meet strange nonhuman people.

"Stadium Beyond the Stars" is also standard in plot, though the gimmick of participants in the First Interstellar Olympic Games is, as far as I know, a new and good one. It is thrown away, except as a mechanism for bringing young Terrans, Antareans, Denebians, and what have you into contact and conflict. We see no more of the Olympics than the opening parade, and there is a wholly impractical restriction that all participants must be from worlds with the same gravitational attraction.

The plot is suitably intricate. The teams from Earth, coming out of sub-space on their way to the world in Ophiuchus where the games will be held, discover the Antarean ship abandoned, like a galactic *Marie Celeste*. Aboard are an old man and a nonhuman creature, both of whom disappear. Nobody will believe the story, and the Olympic Commissioner develops into a thorough-going villain, trying to get our hero disqualified, sending thugs after him, and opposing any move to solve the mystery of the aliens. Naturally, he is thoroughly defeated in the end and

turns out to be just a misguided Denebian patriot. Again, it may be the publisher or editor who has insisted on the book's being watered down, so that there really are no villains.

Details—especially the concept of the galactic brotherhood of Space Captains—are good, but there are careless slips that annoy me. Ophiuchus is a constellation, not a star, and it is by no means at the center of the galaxy—in fact, in the final chapters, an expedition goes to the actual center. And a prevalent illiteracy—by no means limited to this book—is rubbed in again and again, as the plural, "nebulae," is used as a singular noun: "a nebulae." If he wants to, the author can certainly pass this off as future usage, because the niceties of Greek and Latin grammar are fast being shed by colloquial English. I hear even scientists talking about "a strata." However, if he and his editors choose this way out, they should explain why there are no other attempts to show future changes in the language. Me—I think juvenile books have to lean over backward to be accurate scientifically and grammatically, unless the departures from orthodoxy are explained and made important to the plot.

THE MIND READERS, by S. G. Soal & H. T. Bowden. Doubleday & Co., Garden City, N. Y. 1960. 290 pp. \$3.95

One of the grounds of criticism of telepathy and other psi phenomena

has been their lack of predictability. Only in science fiction can telepaths always read thoughts, clairvoyants always see through walls, and precognitives always peer into the future. The actual subjects who come into laboratory situations have as much trouble performing consistently well as I have remembering names to match the faces I recognize immediately.

This book is a record of a series of studies—tests, rather—of two teenage boys, Ieuan and Glyn Jones, who a few years ago came closer to upsetting this dictum than anyone on record. The boys are cousins, sons of Welsh villagers—Glyn, the “guesser,” rather spoiled and aggressive; Ieuan, the “sender” with whom he achieved the highest scores, a few months older and much quieter.

Soal is a former mathematician who is now teaching and studying in the field of psychical research at Trinity College, Cambridge; he did much of his earlier work at the University of London. He has struck me in the past as both more daring and more thorough in his experiments than men like Rhine. He has certainly developed to a fine art the discovery and plugging of loopholes in experimental conditions. Bowden is a science teacher and sometime assistant of Soal's in psychic experiments.

Soal had experimented with the boys' fathers as far back as 1936, in the Welsh village where he usually spent holiday weekends. They scored no better than chance at guessing the standard, numbered Zener cards. After some perplexing results with a

young girl in a Spanish village, described in his “Modern Experiments in Telepathy,” Soal decided to try the Jones children. This time he used animal cards, imprinted with five colored pictures of animals: a red lion, a brown giraffe, a blue penguin, a light gray elephant, and dark gray zebra. Odds were the same as with Zener cards: five of each animal in a pack of twenty-five cards, or one chance in five of guessing a card right.

In his first runs, Glyn began to make scores of the kind made by Soal's former, now famous discoveries, Basil Shackleton and Mrs. Stewart—fifty-seven and fifty-nine right guesses in two hundred tries, compared with the theoretical chance score of forty in two hundred. In test after test his scoring was to remain on this level, and in individual runs he occasionally made twenty or more hits out of twenty-five, and two perfect scores in 17,523 trials. Motivation was good: the boys were paid for high scores, and the tests seem to have been severely limited by the experimenters' budgets. However, like most subjects, when Glyn became bored his scores fell to chance—and he bored easily.

Soal makes no attempt to conceal a fact that, to some critics of ESP investigations, will negate the whole series. The boys were caught at some rather clumsy cheating, and the implication is obvious that they always cheated and were smart enough to hoodwink the experimenters, in spite of the latter's experience. Against

this must be set the meticulously described experimental conditions of the other high-score tests in which cheating by anyone but the experimenters would certainly seem to be impossible. I repeat: Soal is outstanding for his ability to see and plug loopholes in the experimental conditions. The tests were run indoors and out, under hypnosis as well as "straight," and at varying distances, though these were never as great as in Soal's earlier picture-guessing experiments between France and England. There was no evidence of the precognition that had showed up in the Stewart/Shackleton tests, and Glyn scored high only with the animal pictures that Ieuan was "sending" him. He got nowhere in picture guessing tests that Bowden gave him, and he got only near-chance results with other agents than Ieuan.

Soal not only barricaded the tests behind all kinds of safeguards; he brought in an impressive number of witnesses to attest that he was not—as Dr. George Price has charged—faking everything himself. Comments of some of these witnesses, in the appendices, are as interesting as the test reports. These comments close with a slightly testy evaluation by Dr. J. B. Rhine, of whose work Soal has been critical. Rhine welcomes the seemingly watertight evidence that ESP exists—which he feels is no longer needed—and deplores the fact that no more effort was made to get at the mechanisms of telepathy, given such a quantitatively productive subject. That the boys cast no light on

the nature of telepathy, Soal himself admits, though he finds experiments under hypnosis a promising approach that could not be followed up.

The book makes dull reading for anyone who is not interested in the lengths to which experimenters with psi must go and do go to validate their results. That is, it is a scientific report, for scientists—not an entertainment. As such, it adds to the impressiveness of the work by Soal and his associates.

13 GREAT STORIES OF SCIENCE-FICTION, edited by Groff Conklin. Gold Medal Books, New York. No. s-997. 1960. 192 pp. 35¢

No—they're not great—but it's good to see Groff Conklin's excellent taste and editorial balance behind an anthology again.

Several of the contributors to Earl Kemp's "Who Killed Science Fiction?" roundtable made the point that where short stories are concerned, paperback books probably offer no salvation. Books in general don't have the balance and variety of a magazine, and book editors won't take the trouble to develop writers and experiment with new types of story as magazine editors do, or should. Almost any Conklin collection—even his "theme" anthologies—is the exception that proves the rule.

This particular collection gives you thirteen excellent stories: three from here, four from *Galaxy*, three from *F&SF*, and one each from the British

Science Fantasy, *Collier's*, and *Fantastic Universe*. With so many stories, I'm not going to spell out which was where.

"The War is Over," by Algis Budrys, is one of that author's spine chilling little ventures into growing strangeness, in which nothing is as it seems at first. Poul Anderson's "The Light" is one of *that* author's many *tours de force*, casting new light on the deceptively ordinary, just as another light . . . but that's the story. John Wyndham's "Compassion Circuit," I'm afraid, isn't quite up to those two openers, but the story of the robot who functions for Man's own good is competently told.

"Volpla," by Wyman Guin, is another more-than-choice entry in the all-time-anthology stakes, though the end seems a little obvious. The psychological portrait of the self-centered biologist who breeds his little race of winged people is devastating. Then, for contrast and not to spoil the spell, we get Arthur C. Clarke's—"Silence Please!"—barely underplayed farce that goes back to Hugo Gernsback and "Dr. Munchausen" for its sources.

William T. Powers, in "Allegory," gives us an ironic tragedy of bureaucracy, spoiled only by the final regeneration of its hapless hero. Alan Nelson's "Soap Opera" goes from farce to slapstick, as a skywriter fills California with gigantic, indestructible, ubiquitous slogans. William Morrison's "Shipping Clerk" is situation farce where the Clarke and Nelson

stories had their skeleton of broad satire; the story's helpless hero has a pipeline from his stomach into another dimension, so he can't be filled up until . . .

"Technological Retreat," by G. C. Edmondson, is a joyous frolic in which two extraterrestrial Yankees try to sell the equivalent of beads to an aborigine here on Earth. As you see, Mr. Conklin has been able to find enough of the allegedly rare humorous type of science fiction to dominate the middle of his anthology.

As we roll chuckling on into the last third of the book, Damon Knight's "The Analogues"—converted into the first chapter of his "Hell's Pavement"—just suggests the consequences of the beneficent treatment that were developed at length in the novel. No laughing matter here—but then comes "The Available Data on the Worp Reaction," by Lion Miller, a devastating parody of the child-with-super-powers cliché. And then comes Theodore Sturgeon's "The Skills of Xanadu," with a little more overt plot than he has been using for some time.

Finally, Richard Gehman closes the book with "The Machine," another bludgeoning satire on bureaucracy and the military mind. You see Joe McSweeney's machine *did* nothing—but who would believe that? This was in *Collier's* in 1946; Budrys' "The War is Over" was here in ASF, and Poul Anderson's "The Light" was in *Galaxy* in 1957. Funeral wreaths, anybody?

Continued from page 7

idiots, defective as they are, maintain that very, very, deeply inbred ability. Nonspeaking genes were, in the proto-tribal environment, absolutely lethal genes, having a one hundred per cent infant mortality effect. Even recessive nonspeaking genes get pretty thoroughly eliminated in the course of ten thousand generations.

Sure it's hard to breed out recessive characteristics—and at twelve miles a second it takes a long time to get around the galaxy. That doesn't mean it's impossible; it just means it takes time. A quarter million years of time, for eliminating nonspeaking Monkeys from the race of Men.

Now obviously the time to eliminate carriers of defective genes is *before* they breed, not afterward. That is, the young should be tested for defects before being allowed to mate; passing the tests would then give the testee the right to take a mate and start breeding. They would, in other words, be the Manhood Rites.

Any anthropologist can assure you that Manhood Rites are universally found among tribes on all the continents all over the planet. Since the African Negroes, the South American Indians and the Australian Aborigines have had no cultural common origin in the last thirty thousand years, it's fair indication that the Manhood Rites ceremonies have been effectively part of the human tribal system for at least thirty thousand years. That alone would be quite an

extensive selective breeding force.

Now there is one basic feature that is common to practically all Manhood Rites ceremonies everywhere; trial by ordeal.

Remember that one of the two crucial tests that separates Man from Monkey is that a Man can, by rational intellectual effort overcome, override, his instinctive controls. He can do what his instincts violently forbid, and can refrain from doing what his instincts command. A Monkey cannot.

You can train an animal to jump through a flaming hoop—by teaching him the fact that the fire does not hurt. You can not teach an animal to hold still while a burning brand is thrust against its flesh to sear the flesh—to hold still, while the stink of its own burning meat rises into its nostrils. You can teach an animal that its instinctive response *does not apply in this case*; it can then jump through the burning hoop. But the instinct *does* apply when a red-hot coal is burning its way into its flesh.

Three extremely powerful instinctive pain-dread systems exist in animals: 1. Thou shalt not allow thy protective skin to be penetrated lest thou die!

2. Though shalt not allow thy teeth to be destroyed, for without them, thou cannot nourish thyself!

3. Thou shalt protect thy genitals with thy life, for without them thou shalt die genetically.

In other words, skin, teeth, and genitals all have very high instinctive survival value.

Typical Manhood Rites involve ordeals by fire, involving *real*, not mock, destructive burning of the skin, or cutting the skin of the chest in two places, forcing a leather strap through from one slit to the other, and requiring that the boy tear the strap out through his skin, and scari-fying tattooing-the-hard-way. Tooth-filing is another quite standard Manhood test. And circumcision is one of the oldest and most widespread. (The Jews moved it from Manhood to babyhood—but by then, they'd developed some quite different and more important tests.)

I think it will be unequivocally agreed that no Monkey could pass any one of these tests—for the real essence of it is that *verbal commands alone must suffice to override ancient, and valid instincts!*

Because they are *valid* instincts. Occasionally, individuals are born without a sense of pain; such individuals could, of course, pass the ordeal test without any difficulty whatever . . . if they could just manage to live that long. The pain instincts are valid; you can't live without them. The essence of the ancient tribal tests is that a Man, unlike a Monkey, can, by intellectual-volition override valid instincts, in real, not mock, situations.

When the Manhood Rites ordeals started, it's a fair bet that every boy who lost the battle to control his instincts, and ran from the searing brand on his flesh, contributed to the celebration banquet of the successful Men. Not because the tribesmen were cruel, nor because they were

punishing him for running—but because he had turned out to be a Monkey, not a Man, and roast Monkey was a standard item of diet anyway.

The tribe that relaxed its tests—that stopped culling the Monkeys from their Men—was aberrant, a defective tribe, and was presently destroyed by some neighboring tribe. Because Monkeys will not face real, personal pain in battle, simply because they must protect their fellow-tribesmen. A Monkey will not take high risk of pain and death—will not, because he cannot override the automatic instinct pilot-controls—just to save fellow tribesmen.

We, today, benefit from the ancient Manhood Rites selective breeding system that went on for tens of thousands of generations, whenever a jet pilot, in a plane with a flamed-out engine, rides his flying coffin into the ground . . . so it won't fall into a schoolyard, a hospital, or a suburban development. He does it because his ancestors were Men, not Monkeys—they passed the test of Manhood. They earned the right to breed.

Our ancestors may have been ignorant in many things—but they were not stupid, nor were they fools. They found ways to selectively breed Men from Monkeys—and they had the cold, high, and ruthless determination to do it.

Man has been defined as a "rational animal"; the ancient animal instincts are essential to being a Man. The ancient pain instinct, the ancient instinct to find a mate and breed—

without these the individual and his line would die. Yet the essence of the "rational" part of the definition is that Man can override the instinct controls for cause.

An individual specimen with that strange characteristic must arise constantly among the Monkeys; the difference is that ten thousand generations of selective breeding have produced, in Man, a genetic norm that has that characteristic.

But that is a far more subtle and complex question than the simple "speaks" or "can't speak"; the ability to speak has been almost absolutely stabilized in Man. The ability to override instinct for rational cause cannot be so sharply and simply defined at any level higher than the level of physical pain.

The modern rapist, who cannot override an instinctive drive, would present a very simple problem to our ancestors. "He is not a Man, but a Monkey; destroy him."

The more subtle levels of rational overcontrol are still in process of selection; never, in all time to come, will the necessity for selective breeding of human beings end, however. There are not only outcroppings of recessive genes to fight—there are always negative mutations that regenerate the eliminated and rejected genes. There will be Monkeys who cannot learn speech born, through all future ages. There are, and will be,

Monkeys who cannot take rational command from the automatic-pilot of instincts born. Through all the ages ahead, both types, when born, must be denied membership in the race of Man.

Currently, there's another level of selective breeding needed—and coming up. The Tribal Man was selectively bred for the characteristic that training and instruction should be able to override instinct.

What we know as Civilization requires a higher characteristic; that judgment of an immediate, present instance be able to override *both training and instinct*.

The Monkey was required to give up his reliance on instinct to become a Man; the Tribesman must give up his reliance on instinct *and training* to become a Citizen.

The Monkey's sense of rightness-and-security was, basically, derived from all his ancestors—instinctive. The Tribesman derived his sense of rightness and security from all his tribe—the training in ritual and taboo. The Citizen must derive his sense of rightness from his own judgments—without losing sight of the fact that his judgments can be wrong.

The Citizen, poor guy, has to get along without any sense of security; it is a luxury he can't afford, if he is to live by judgment, instead of Traditional Training or Instinct.

THE EDITOR.

New Ed McBain

In *See Them Die* by Ed McBain, just published, the cops of the 87th Precinct are pitted against one smart, evasive hoodlum who has become idol and symbol for the terrorist neighborhood gangs. With each passing moment that the hoodlum remains free, the gangs become bolder. The race to see who will close in first — the detectives or the young outlaws — makes this one of the tensest cases yet in the series that Anthony Boucher calls "unflaggingly excellent."

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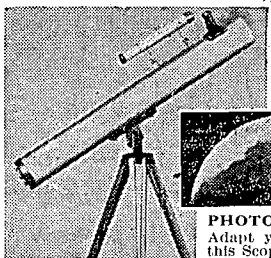
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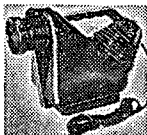
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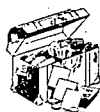
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